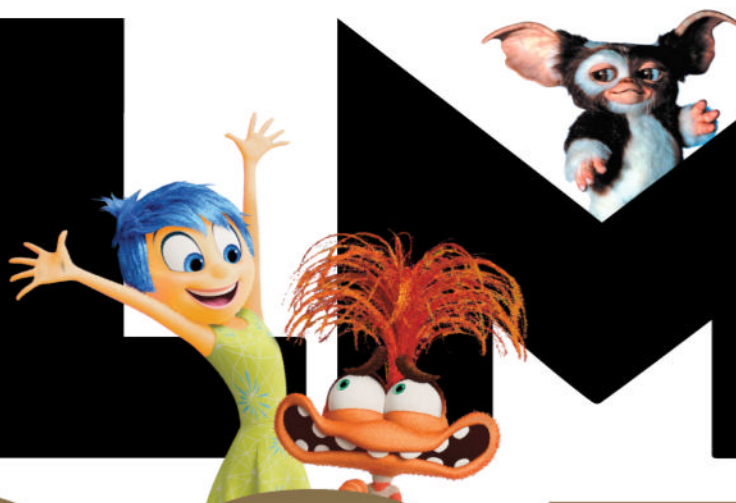


★★★★★ TOTAL FILM ANNUAL ★★★★★

TOTAL



Digital
Edition



VOLUME 7

CELEBRATING THE YEAR IN FILM

MASSIVE NEW RELEASES! ALIEN: ROMULUS, DUNE: PART 2, DEADPOOL & WOLVERINE, FURIOSA, INSIDE OUT 2
STAR INTERVIEWS! VIGGO MORTENSEN, NATALIE PORTMAN, RIDLEY SCOTT, JACK BLACK, ANTHONY MACKIE
ANNIVERSARY CLASSICS! THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT, GREMLINS, HARRY POTTER, AFTER HOURS, E.T.



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WELCOME TO THE TOTAL FILM ANNUAL 2025

At CinemaCon in March of 2024 these was one phrase on the lips of the industry professionals in attendance: 'survive til '25'. The reason was simple – 2024 was the year that cinemas, audiences and studios would suffer the consequences of the 2023 actors and writers strike which crippled Hollywood's movie-making machine for over six months. The only hope was to wait it out.

And for the first five months of the year, that pessimistic outlook proved grimly accurate, with a string of high-profile releases failing at the box office, including the well-reviewed likes of *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* and *The Fall Guy*, and the not-so-well-reviewed likes of *Argylle* and *Madame Web*.

Cries of 'it's so over' echoed online. Could embattled cinema chains even make it to 2025 with meagre offerings that put the box office total for the year down some 20% versus the highs of 2019? Then in June audiences flocked to *Inside Out 2*, the emotional animated sequel that would go on to crack the all-time top 10. *Twisters*, *Deadpool & Wolverine* and *Longlegs* proved to have similarly long box office, er, legs, evidence it wasn't just families fuelling cinema's fortunes. You could say 'we're so back'.

With the titanic likes of *Gladiator II*, *Joker: Folie à Deux*, *Moana 2* and *Mufasa: The Lion King* to round out the year, those industry professionals needn't have worried. Much of the audience may have moved to streaming, but there is still a robust appetite for the big screen experience. And 2025 promises to be one of the biggest years ever, featuring as it does *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*, *Mission: Impossible 8*, *Tron: Ares*, *Jurassic World 4*, James Gunn's *Superman*, *Snow White*, *28 Years Later*, *Michael*, *Mickey 17*, *Captain America: Brave New World*, two Frankenstein movies (from Guillermo del Toro and Maggie Gyllenhaal), Paul Thomas Anderson's \$100m Leonardo Di Caprio movie and *Avatar: Fire and Ash*. Phew!

As always, Total Film will be there to cover it all with world exclusive interviews, first looks and deep dives into the major movie releases that matter, like those featured in the year in review you hold in your hands. 'Survive'? How about 'thrive' til '25, and beyond.

Jordan Farley
Editor

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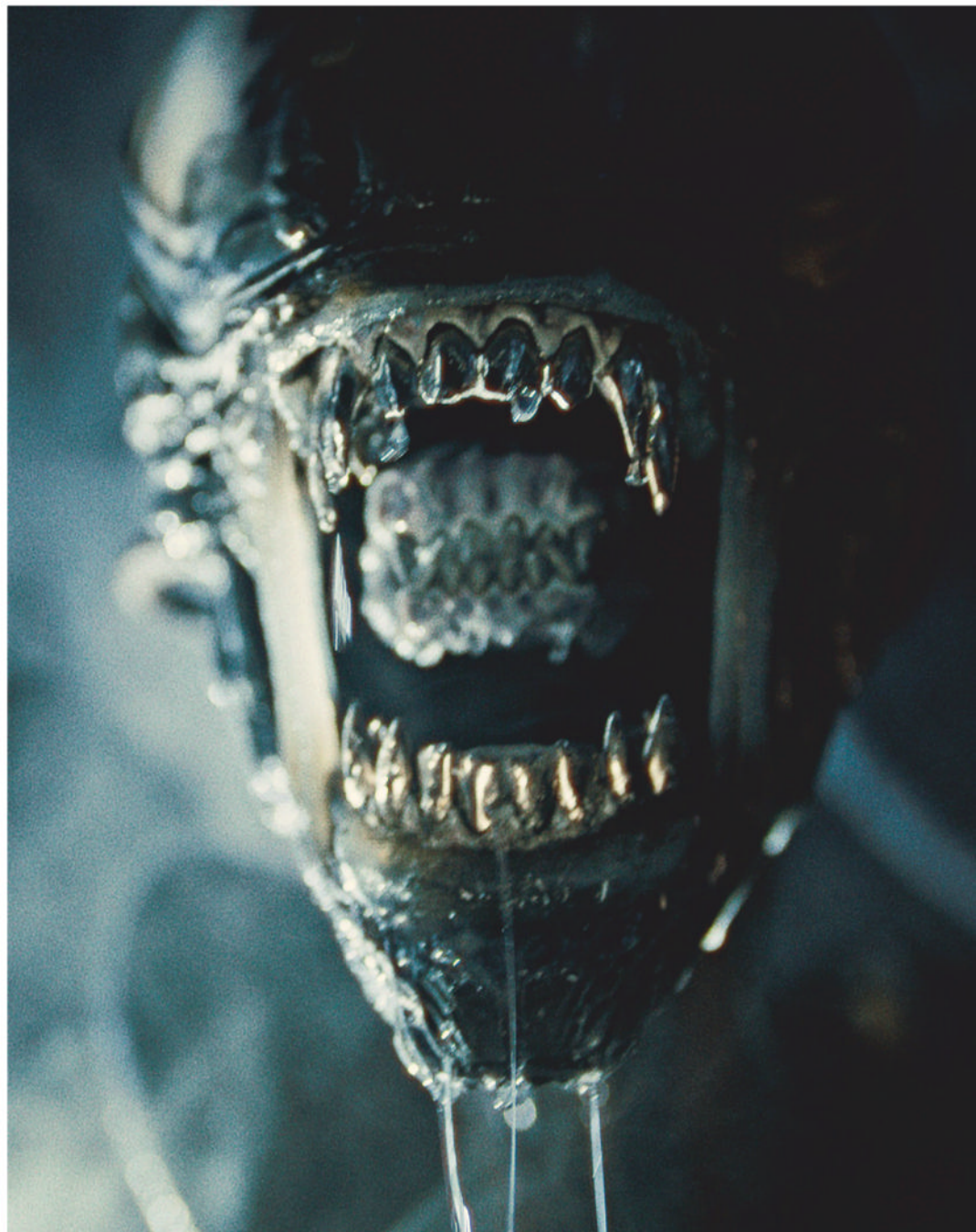
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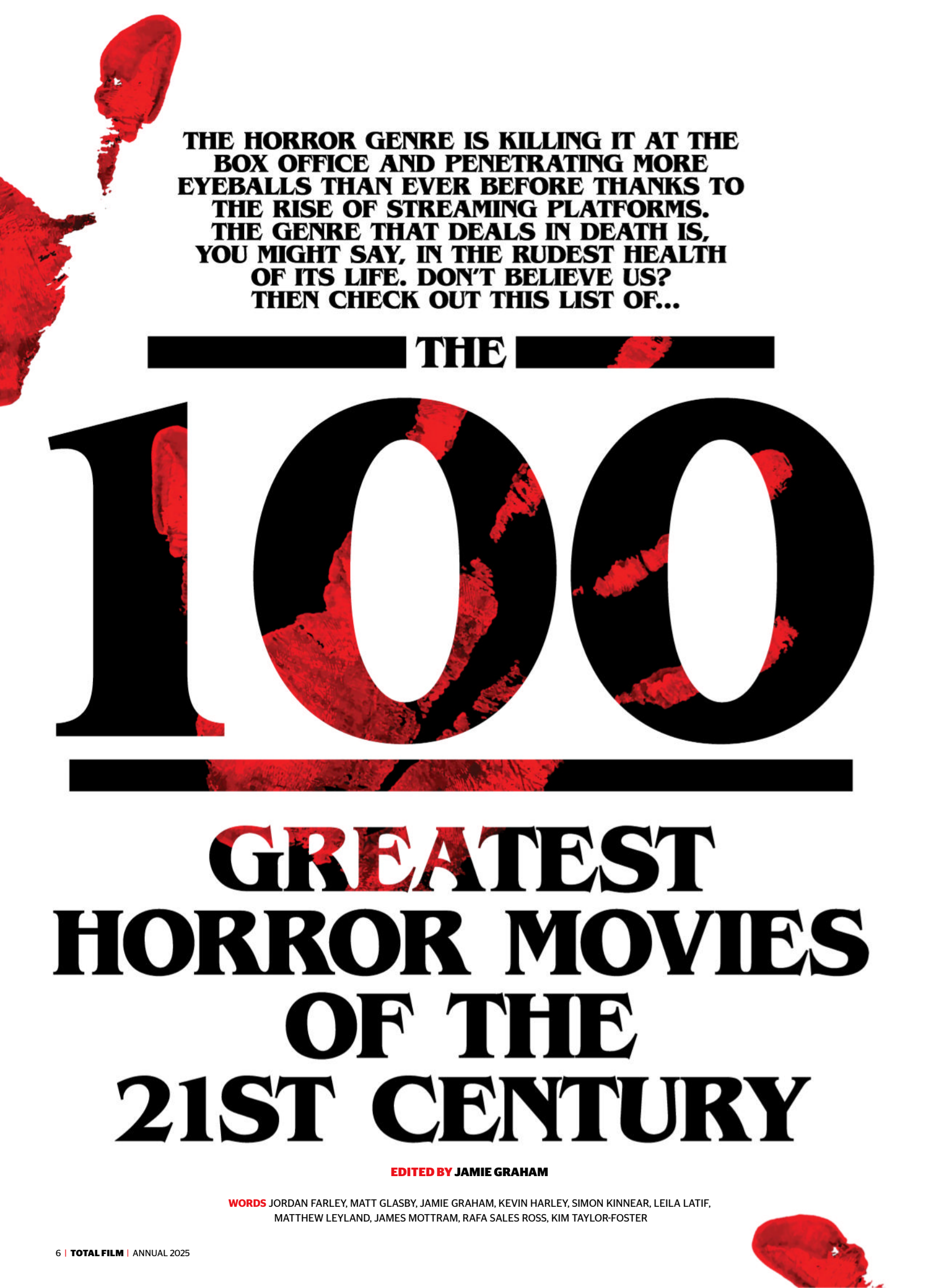
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THE HORROR GENRE IS KILLING IT AT THE BOX OFFICE AND PENETRATING MORE EYEBALLS THAN EVER BEFORE THANKS TO THE RISE OF STREAMING PLATFORMS. THE GENRE THAT DEALS IN DEATH IS, YOU MIGHT SAY, IN THE RUDEST HEALTH OF ITS LIFE. DON'T BELIEVE US? THEN CHECK OUT THIS LIST OF...

THE

100

**GREATEST
HORROR MOVIES
OF THE
21ST CENTURY**

EDITED BY JAMIE GRAHAM

WORDS JORDAN FARLEY, MATT GLASBY, JAMIE GRAHAM, KEVIN HARLEY, SIMON KINNEAR, LEILA LATIF, MATTHEW LEYLAND, JAMES MOTTRAM, RAFA SALES ROSS, KIM TAYLOR-FOSTER

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50

RELIC 2020

Dementia haunts Australian writer/director Natalie Erika James' affecting debut, robbing a poor matriarch (Robyn Nevin) of her memories, as her daughter (Emily Mortimer) and granddaughter (Bella Heathcote) try to intervene. Taking cues from *The Shining*, James gives the family home a malevolent character of its own, the walls creaking and choked with mould.

BEST BIT Heathcote gets trapped in a labyrinth without end.



49

THE OTHERS 2001

Before Nicole Kidman played Grace in Lars von Trier's seminal *Dogville*, she played Grace in Alejandro Amenábar's skin-tingling suspense about a mother living with two photosensitive children on a haunted Victorian estate. Weaving themes of religion, subservience and disability, *The Others* is aptly described by its director as a 'story about human ghosts... and that can be even scarier.'

BEST BIT Grace finds the *Book of the Dead*...



48

STARRY EYES 2014

'Mulholland Drive meets *Rosemary's Baby*, with gnarly body horror' might have been the pitch for a film that tracks struggling actress Sarah (Alex Essoe) as she sells body and soul to land a role, then falls apart – mentally and physically. 'I was ravenous to be a part of it,' said Essoe, which is all rather meta.

Directors Kevin Kölsch and Dennis Widmyer landed studio horror *Pet Sematary* off this low-budget stunner.

BEST BIT Vomiting maggots.



DOCTOR SLEEP 2019

47 The novel and film of *The Shining* are both brilliant but very different, with Stephen King famously loathing Stanley Kubrick's take. So kudos to Mike Flanagan for lovingly adapting the author's personal sequel novel while also ensuring it follows in the (snowy) footsteps of the director's iconic creation. The three-hour Director's Cut of *Doctor Sleep* is especially good, digging deeper into the characters as Danny, all grown up to look like Ewan McGregor, helps young Abra (Kyliegh Curran) to control her power and turn it on the cult of nomadic psychic-vampires (led by a chilling Rebecca Ferguson) who seek to devour her.

BEST BIT Heeere's the Overlook Hotel!



SWITCHBLADE ROMANCE 2003

45 Known as *Haute Tension* (High Tension) in its native France, and fully living up to the billing, Alexandre Aja's turbo-charged slasher is like a banger you can't help dancing to, even if the words don't make sense. Students Alex (Maïwenn) and Marie (Cécile de France) head to Alex's parents' house, only for a psycho (Philippe Nahon) to break in, kill the spares and kidnap Alex. A frenzied chase follows, spiked with ultra-violence and building to a reveal that infuriates even the faithful – critic Richard Roeper called it, 'An extremely well-made, very grisly and ultimately dishonest slasher film.'

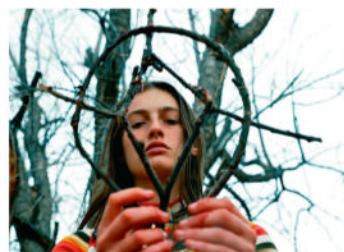
BEST BIT Heads do more than roll during the home invasion...



GINGER SNAPS 2000

46 The bond between two sisters can be profound, but in the case of Brigitte and Ginger Fitzgerald (Emily Perkins and Katharine Isabelle), it's also kind of all they have. The gothic siblings are outcasts in their wholesome Canadian town, and even before any werewolves make their presence known, things are looking bleak. The first words its scribe Karen Walton wrote down were, 'Being a teenage girl is a nightmare,' and this astute Canadian horror captures the alienation, the rage and the hormones – lycanthropes have monthly cycles, after all. That it's also funny and gory is a bonus.

BEST BIT Piercing a werewolf's naval with a silver ring proves a massive error.



HELLBENDER 2021

44 *Tangled* remade by Ben Wheatley is a near fit for the Adams family's homegrown marvel. Teenager Izzy (Zelda Adams) is kept isolated by her mother (Zelda's mum Toby Poser), who claims the girl has an autoimmune condition. But it turns out they're not exactly human – and once Izzy realises she's a supernatural being who draws power from fear-laced blood, all bets are off. Co-written/directed by Zelda, Poser and father John Adams, the result is a woodsy riot-grrrl freak-out, powered by raucous tunes from Izzy and Mum's in-film garage band. 'Witchy and dark and crooked and gnarly,' as Toby puts it, *Hellbender* rocks.

BEST BIT 'Now it's my turn...' Izzy raises hell.



43

THE LIGHTHOUSE 2019

'Nothing good happens when two men are trapped in a giant phallus,' quipped director and co-writer Robert Eggers. His film is clear evidence to the contrary. Willem Dafoe and Robert Pattinson star as a pair of 19th-century 'wickies' driven insane by isolation, their full-bore commitment a perfect match for Eggers' exquisitely ornate dialogue.

BEST BIT 'Hark Triton, hark!' Thomas Wake blows up over an indifferent review of his lobster.



42

THE HOUSE OF THE DEVIL 2009

'I wanted it to feel like this is something that could have really happened,' said writer/director Ti West of his babysitter-in-peril flick. Against her better instincts, cash-strapped teen Samantha (Jocelin Donahue) agrees to spend the night looking after a spooky old lady called Mother, the slow-burn set-up building to a gratifyingly gonzo climax.

BEST BIT Samantha meets Mother for a drink – of blood.



41

TIMECRIMES 2007

Most time-travel films' internal logic eventually breaks down, but writer/director Nacho Vigalondo's horror sci-fi is both clever and coherent. In a tortuously twisted tale, Hector (Karra Elejalde) has his holiday ruined when he's attacked by a man with a bandaged face. As time begins to spiral and Hector repeatedly quests for answers, each loop only thickens the atmosphere and sharpens the scares.

BEST BIT Scissors!



40

UNDER THE SHADOW 2016

The rise of Iranian horror (see also #33) has reminded us that the genre is never more potent than when scratching at societal itches. Tehran-born director Babak Anvari mined his roots for his 80s-set tale of a mother (Narges Rashidi) under siege three-fold: from Iraqi bombings, the clerical thought-police, and her daughter's possession by a malevolent djinn.

BEST BIT The perfectly executed smashed-window jump scare.



39

BERBERIAN SOUND STUDIO 2012

Need to soundtrack a torture? Snap a radish. That's the gig facing mild-mannered Foley wizard Gilderoy (Toby Jones), in Peter Strickland's playful, perplexing giallo homage. The masterstroke is that, while we hear everything, we never see what Gilderoy sees – a disassociation that mirrors his disintegrating sanity.

BEST BIT A voice actor records his role as an 'aroused goblin'.



38

THE GUEST 2014

Dan Stevens turned his TV persona upside-*Downton* here as ex-army man David, who charms his way into a dead soldier's family. His increasingly deadly antics reap both alarm and dark LOLs: 'The humour comes from the situation itself,' says director Adam Wingard. 'The expectation that builds is funny because you're always wondering where we're going to take things.'

BEST BIT David owning a bar fight: beatings, broken bottles, bribery.

**A QUIET PLACE** 2018

37 'An extraordinary piece of work,' raved Stephen King. 'The SILENCE [sic] makes the camera's eye open wide in a way few movies manage.' *A Quiet Place* also made audiences behave in a way few movies manage, compelling soda-slurpers and crisp-crunchers to stow their appetites lest they break the unnerving spell cast by a story where sightless ETs with super-hearing stalk humanity. Birthing a franchise (*Day One* is next on the cards), AQP established director/actor/co-writer John Krasinski as a triple threat and made a star of deaf actress Millicent Simmonds, central to the film's success as a layered and deeply felt portrait of (post-apocalyptic) family life.

BEST BIT Lee's final sign-off. 'I have always loved you...'

**SAW** 2004

35 Despite being culpable for the largely regrettable 'torture-porn' era, James Wan's *Saw* is far craftier than the films that rode its blood-soaked coattails – including the nine *Saw* movies to follow. Jigsaw killer John Kramer has imprisoned two men in a grotty bathroom. The question 'why' is answered by Leigh Whannell's sly script through a series of flashbacks-within-flashbacks, and twists-within-twists. Shot for just \$700,000, Wan envisioned a classically Hitchcockian thriller, but adopted a 'more gritty and rough around the edges' shooting style 'due to the lack of time and money'. Add Jigsaw's iconic traps, and the result is the most influential horror of the early 21st century.

BEST BIT 'Game over' for Adam.

**MANDY** 2018

36 'I did a lot [of drugs] in high school. I smoked weed and did mushrooms and acid.' No shit. Visionary writer/director Panos Cosmatos followed his psychedelic debut *Beyond the Black Rainbow* with this bizarre midnight-madness feature, in which Nicolas Cage's lumberjack embarks on a roaring rampage of revenge after being forced to view his wife's death at the hands of a hippy cult. Set in 1983, in a 'mythological landscape', and shot on 16mm with colour filters to a synth score by the late Johann Johannsson, the whole thing look like the covers of a rack of 80s heavy metal albums, viewed through an opium haze. A bloody, druggy masterpiece.

BEST BIT Chainsaw fight! Or Cage sat on the loo unleashing guttural howls of anguish.

**MAD GOD** 2021

34 Phil Tippett is a VFX wizard who's won two Oscars and worked on *RoboCop*, *Jurassic Park*, *Starship Troopers* and various instalments of the *Twilight Saga*. But it's this obsessional work, 30 years in the making, that most plummets jaws, as much for its technique as the fact it's so imaginatively, viscerally, relentlessly grim. Set in an underworld, this dialogue-free mix of puppetry, stop-motion and fleeting live-action dishes non-stop cruelty and horror, as hundreds are killed, pulped, relieved of their innards, and worse. 'It's like Pasolini made a Pixar movie,' wrote *Sight and Sound*.

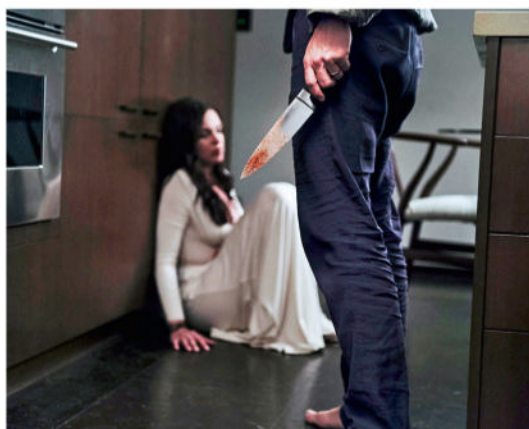
BEST BIT: The diving bell taking our 'hero' to hell (?) goes down and down and down. And down. And down and down and down. And down.



A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT 2014

33 Born in Britain to an Iranian family and raised in the US, writer/director Ana Lily Amirpour had quite the cultural mix of references growing up. They cleverly permeate her feature debut, a vampire movie set in Iran by way of Jim Jarmusch with a touch of Gus Van Sant. The result is a heavily stylised black-and-white chronicling of the illicit activities of an abaya-wearing vampire (Sheila Vand) who roams the derelict streets of fictitious Bad City to a sharply curated soundtrack that would become synonymous with Amirpour's daring, vibrant work. 'You're free to extract as much subtext as possible,' said Amirpour.

BEST BIT Our vamp on a skateboard. It's how she rolls.



THE INVITATION 2015

31 Karyn Kusama's fraught horror-thriller plays out like a drama for most of its runtime – it's only in retrospect that the true awfulness becomes apparent. Grieving dad Will (Logan Marshall-Green) takes his new girlfriend Kira (Emayatzy Corinealdi) to a party hosted by his ex-wife, Eden (Tammy Blanchard), and her new too-perfect partner David (Michiel Huisman), who are keeping an almighty secret. 'What *The Invitation* allowed me to do was go straight into the heart of the concerns of my nightmares,' said Kusama. 'What does it mean to be human, and what are humans capable of?' The results positively jitter with dread.

BEST BIT Will escapes for some fresh air – there goes the neighbourhood.



THE CABIN IN THE WOODS 2011

32 Five pals-slash-archetypes book a weekend at the titular locale... then find themselves in what could be described as H.P. Lovecraft's *The Truman Show*. After writing gigs on *Buffy*, *Lost* and *Cloverfield*, Drew Goddard made his directorial bow with a movie as genre-savvy, twisty and monster-y as any of the above, and then some. 'We love horror movies, and we sort of set out to make the ultimate version,' he revealed. Indeed, the affection is so palpable, *Cabin* never risks being skewered by its own knowingness – the jolts are genuine and those archetypes invite emotional investment, especially 'Virgin' Dana (Kristen Connolly) and scene-stealing stoner 'Fool' Marty (Fran Kranz).

BEST BIT Every elevator 'ding' yielding a new nightmare.



IT 2017

30 Horror fans thought they'd seen *It* all before, thanks to the well-remembered 1990 TV adap of Stephen King's source novel. But they soon found themselves feasting on Andy Muschietti's fresh reinterpretation, which cannily rode *Stranger Things*' 80s-set wave. Muschietti's movie is grislier and more intense than that King-influenced series, anchored in Bill Skarsgård's viciously gleeful turn as Pennywise the Dancing Clown, who aims to make the kids of Derry his Maine meal. 'Pennywise is constantly on the level of bursting,' Skarsgård told the *New York Times*. 'At almost any moment, he could lunge at you...'

BEST BIT He may be evil incarnate, but Pennywise sure can bust a move.



29

MONSTERS 2010

Gareth Edwards' debut maps out fresh, fertile creature-feature turf. A photographer (Scoot McNairy) escorts a woman (Whitney Able) across 'infected' Mexican terrain to the US border; tentacular aliens occupy the territory. Awful and awesome, Edwards' off-world octopi are low-budget wonders, looming luminously and ominously over an improv love story.

BEST BIT From beauty to time-loop terror, the climax kills.



28

THE ORPHANAGE 2007

The fear of abandonment haunts J.A. Bayona's elegantly gothic debut, which follows a couple re-opening the children's home she grew up in, but losing their adopted son in the process.

Equal parts scary – hello, creepy sackcloth-clad child – and sad, the film retains a powerful ambiguity. Critic Roger Ebert called it, 'A superior ghost story, if indeed there are ghosts in it.'

BEST BIT Evil Benigna is knocked down by an ambulance. GOTCHA!



27

RAW 2016

Julia Ducournau's coming-of-age body horror sees Justine (Garance Marillier) navigate veterinary school, hazing rituals and sex – learning more about herself and her family than she can chew on. 'I could have made a gore-fest.

But no, I wanted the audience to understand that it's actually very human to be like this,' said Ducournau of her cannibal drama.

BEST BIT Justine eats her sister's middle finger.



BLISS 2019

26 If Gaspar Noé and Abel Ferrara combined to remake *Phantom Thread* as a grindhouse vampire flick with a doom metal soundtrack, it might be something like this. More-is-more director Joe Begos shoots on grainy, neon-drenched 16mm for this frenziedly intense tale of Dezzy (Dora Madison), an LA artist who binges on drugs, sex and murder to shift her creative block, and awakens from blackouts to a macabre masterpiece daubed in blood. 'A gritty-ass fucking drug movie [with] vampire shades to it,' is how Begos describes his hallucinogenic horrorshow. Quite.

BEST BIT Dezzy cruising seedy LA in an open-top convertible.



THE INVISIBLE MAN 2020

23 How do you make H.G. Wells' 19th-century creation scary again? 'You've got to make him mysterious,' says writer/director Leigh Whannell, whose film centres not on the title character but on his ex, whom he seemingly persecutes from beyond the grave. This is a fantastical but horribly recognisable study of abuse, driven by Elisabeth Moss' astonishingly committed performance as a woman enduring untold (and unseen) trauma before fighting back. Universal's scaled-back standalone emerged in the wake of its failed Dark Universe... so at least we have *The Mummy* (2017) to thank for something.

BEST BIT The restaurant kill leaves innocent Moss with blood on her hands.



HOUNDS OF LOVE 2016

25 Part-drawn from truth, Ben Young's terrifically-played kidnap thriller is no Kate Bush tribute. His 1987-set tale pulls us grimly close to murderous spouses (Stephen Curry, Emma Booth) whose sick-pup home life in suburban Perth takes all the fun out of dysfunctional. As they kidnap 17-year-old Vicki (Ashleigh Cummings), her eyes become our harrowed POV. *Hounds* bites hard, Young generating a distressed intensity from his washed-out images and controlled leads, favouring taut, tortured restraint over gratuitous shocks. 'It's not about what does happen, it's about what can happen,' the director explained.

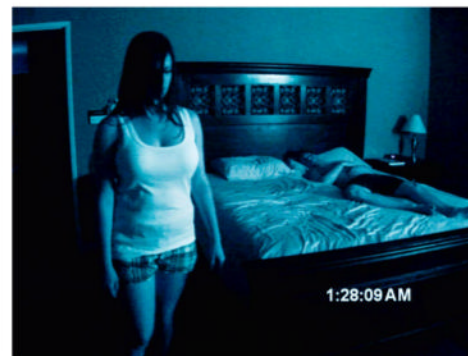
BEST BIT 'Always danger...' Joy Division's *Atmosphere* features to fiercely cathartic effect.



THE DEVIL'S BACKBONE 2001

22 Transposing a classic spook story to Civil War-torn 1930s Spain, Guillermo del Toro's masterly horror finds its monsters in men, and vice-versa. Beautifully shot, tenderly acted and, in places, properly creepy, it concerns an orphanage haunted by a childish spectre known as 'the one who sighs'. Perhaps del Toro gained inspiration from once hearing the ghostly sighs of his deceased uncle as a youngster? But it's a political, as well as a personal, work, with the director calling it 'a gothic tale set against the backdrop of the greatest ghost engine of all: war'.

BEST BIT Santi gets his final, watery revenge on his killer.



PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2007

24 Like *The Blair Witch Project* relocated to the bedroom, Oren Peli's found-footage frightener is a demonic display of low-budget, high-focus dread. In San Diego, a static camera watches Micah and Katie as they sleep. Doors move, duvets are tugged... might the demon that disturbed younger Katie's nights be here? Peli churns up psychological ambiguities to draw us in, then deploys ingenious uses of pacing (those fast-forwards...) and perspective to max our immersion until – slowly, surely – home becomes right where the horror is. 'You can never avoid being asleep at your own home,' said Peli. Sweet dreams.

BEST BIT 'I think we'll be OK now...' Or not.



MIDSOMMAR 2019

21 Scandi pagan rituals get the Ari Aster treatment in his sophomore film, an ambitious folk horror that riffs on *The Wicker Man* while torching toxic masculinity. 'It's such a large film – the colour, the sound, the quality, the content,' says Florence Pugh, who plays Dani, a traumatised American student who attends a midsummer festival with a group of friends in rural Sweden. Bad move. Or is it? What we know for sure is that Aster's drama is a trip: sex, drugs and WTF brown bear costumes. We prefer the theatrical cut, but the Director's Cut should also be seen.

BEST BIT The elders jumping from the cliff truly rocks.



20

IN MY SKIN 2002

'Cinematic navel-gazing,' huffed *The Washington Post*, but the protagonist played by Marina de Van, who also directs, is obsessed with all parts of her body, poking and pulling, pricking and cutting, biting and chewing. This stomach-churner explores self-harm as a form of release, of self-control, and of pleasure. It's body horror to make Cronenberg shiver.

BEST BIT Rolling sensually in her own blood.



19

HOST 2020

'We were being told that outside is scary and inside is safe,' says director Rob Savage, whose seance horror upended that COVID-19-era wisdom in sensational fashion. Six friends invite a medium to their weekly Zoom call; unexpected guests join, too, yielding a succession of resourcefully mounted no-budget shocks. The cast's authentic chemistry heightens the impact.

BEST BIT The final session-expiry countdown: 3, 2, WTF!



18

28 DAYS LATER 2002

'I found zombies a bit daft,' reckoned Danny Boyle, before screenwriter Alex Garland's canny reimagining changed his mind. Mining John Wyndham's speculative sci-fi and Brit-grit realism, Boyle's 'zombies' are anything but daft. They're angry, they're infected and - uh-oh - they go like the clappers. Ruuuuun!

BEST BIT Cillian Murphy wanders a deserted London in scenes eerily prescient of lockdown.

TRAIN TO BUSAN 2016

17 The pitch: zombies on a train. Sometimes, it really is that easy. Yet Yeon Sang-ho's action blockbuster transcends such apparent simplicity by sweating the details. No wonder Edgar Wright called it the 'best zombie movie I've seen in forever'.

Key to its freshness is setting. Yeon's aim was to give it 'elements of Korean emotion and tone that aren't felt in Hollywood films'. Like fellow Korean Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer*, Yeon's train is a metaphor for class difference, the film's plot a parable about helping others instead of being selfish.

Yeon milks every source of tension from putting fast zombies in a confined space; the film's inventive, relentless set-pieces are logically structured as a station-by-station, carriage-by-carriage survival odyssey. Yet by adding characters we care about, it's moving in both senses of the word.

BEST BIT The passengers attempt to leave the train at Daejeon station. Bad idea.



THE MIST 2007

15 Does *The Mist* - Frank Darabont's sublime Stephen King adaptation - have the best horror-movie ending of the 21st century? There's a strong case to be made. Writer/director Darabont was so committed to his soul-crushing send-off - a King-approved change to the original novella - that he accepted an \$18 million budget to keep his ending intact, when \$40 million was on the table. Great call. Set largely in a Maine supermarket, where locals seek refuge from the nightmarish eldritch abominations that have descended on their town (perhaps from a Lovecraft story) in a thick mist, the film's true monsters are the people walking the aisles who forget their humanity at the end of the world. As Darabont puts it, 'It's *Lord of the Flies* that happens to have some cool monsters in it!' (Note: the black-and-white version kills.)

BEST BIT The cavalry arrives... too late.



[REC] 2007

16 Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza's *[Rec]* is horror cinema at its breathlessly intense best. A Spanish found-footage gem, it follows a TV reporter and her cameraman who are quarantined inside an apartment building where an unholy infection is turning the residents into feral creatures. A zombie movie in all but name, *[Rec]* unfolds in real time over its pacy 78 minutes - an ethos worlds away from methodical genre granddaddy *Night of the Living Dead*. Taking a page out of Ridley Scott's playbook, many of the surprises were sprung on the cast in the moment. 'Don't stop, react to anything that's going to happen,' were Plaza and Balagueró's instructions. The result: pure terror. 'The film corners you with the ferocity of a Spanish inquisitor with a branding iron and holds you there to the bitter end,' noted late *Observer* critic Philip French.

BEST BIT What's lurking in the attic?





14

TALK TO ME 2022

The Exorcist for the TikTok age? Vividly and cinematically playing with the theme of possession, writer-directors Danny and Michael Philippou pair this with grief, as 17-year-old Mia (Sophie Wilde) is offered a hand in communing with her late mother... or not. "We wanted it to feel dangerous and unpredictable," says Danny. Mission accomplished.

BEST BIT Handshakes all round for the ballsy ending.

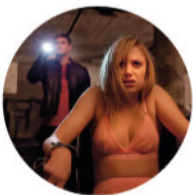


13

KILL LIST 2011

Essentially a cursed kitchen-sink thriller, Ben Wheatley's second feature closes around you like a trap. Two contract killers take a job, but do they know why they're signing in blood? No, and the blackly comic horrors that ensue steadily intensify. Come the climax, there's no escape, no catharsis: 'You're supposed,' says Wheatley, 'to be suffering.'

BEST BIT The Librarian. It's hammer time.



12

IT FOLLOWS 2014

Powered by a spectacular synth score, this ultra-stylish chiller puts a contemporary spin on *Ringu* by swapping a haunted VHS for a cursed STD. Maika Monroe is the unlucky victim, pursued by a relentless, shapeshifting slow-walker that turns every background player into a potential heart attack. 'The best horror film in years,' screamed *Vice*.

BEST BIT The Tall Man makes an entrance.

LET THE RIGHT ONE IN 2008

11 The vampire movie gets reborn in this Scandinavian tale as chilly as a Stockholm winter. Adapted from John Ajvide Lindqvist's novel, it tracks bullied Oskar (Kåre Hedebrant) as he finds comfort in his friendship with Eli (Lina Leandersson), a new kid on the block who only appears at night, carries a strange odour and thirsts for blood. As they bond, Eli becomes Oskar's protector. 'I see them as the same character,' said director Tomas Alfredson, suggesting that Eli is somehow a manifestation of Oskar's muted anger at the world. Putting its own unique spin on vampire lore – these creatures even send cats into a frenzy – Alfredson's minimalist masterpiece may have inspired an American movie remake and TV series, but neither boasted its sensitivity and strangeness.

BEST BIT The underwater-POV swimming pool attack, as Eli takes out Oskar's tormentors.

**MARTYRS 2008**

10 Perhaps the most bruising film of the New French Extremism movement, writer/director Pascal Laugier's masterwork is wreathed in pain. Beginning in the realms of J-horror, as kidnapping victim Lucie (Mylène Jampanoï) is tormented by a mysterious figure from the past, it moves towards torture porn (or 'anti-torture porn' as Laugier put it) when she and childhood friend Anna (Morjana Alaoui) kill a seemingly innocent family, only to discover [SPOILERS AHEAD!] a subterranean chamber beneath their home...

'Horror shouldn't be a unifying genre,' said Laugier, who doesn't flinch from exploring the aftershocks of abuse, and the brutalities perpetrated in the name of religion. 'It must divide, shock, make cracks in the certainties of the audience.' Consider that a warning.

BEST BIT Skin flayed, eyes aflame, Anna finally sees the truth. Both troubling and transcendental.

THE BABADOOK 2014

09 Jennifer Kent's outstanding debut tackles grief, loss, guilt, mental health, motherhood and the absent-father theme – by terrorising a mother and son via a supernatural monster with a taste for fine millinery.

Amelia (Essie Davis) has raised six-year-old Samuel (Noah Wiseman) alone after her husband was killed in a car accident, and must watch in horror as his behaviour spirals when a sinister pop-up book – *Mister Babadook* – mysteriously appears.

Made for just \$2.5 million, *The Babadook* based its top-hatted monster on stills of Lon Chaney's vampire in lost silent film *London After Midnight*, and brought it to life via stop-motion animation and practical effects. Boy, does it work. 'I've never seen a more terrifying film,' said *The Exorcist*'s William Friedkin.

BEST BIT When Amelia goes full big bad Babadook, uttering unimaginable things to her son.





THE DESCENT 2005

08 Who's afraid of the dark? In Neil Marshall's hands, we all are. The power of *The Descent* is that (unless you're watching the punch-pulling US cut) the title is a hideous promise. Down we go.

Jangling nerves from the opening scene, Marshall dials up the tension as a sextet of friends go spelunking in an uncharted cave system. They're in trouble long before they realise they're not alone.

'There was malicious intent on my part,' admitted Marshall. 'I wanted to scare the shit out of people.' In impressively cramped, soundstage-built locations, Marshall heightened realism and claustrophobia by only using appropriate light sources (flares, glow-sticks) wielded by his cast. And that's without mentioning his inspired decision to make his heroes women, offering an authentic portrait of frazzled friendship undone by grief, betrayal and troglodyte predators.

BEST BIT The night-vision reveal.



KAIRO 2001

07 'When I'm told that *Kairo* predicted the future, I have to say that was not my original intention,' says Japanese director Kiyoshi Kurosawa. Well, we can only assume that his intention was to reduce terrified viewers to whimpering wrecks, because it's the only thing this does better.

Made as the world was getting to grips with the internet, *Kairo* (*Pulse*) anticipated 21st-century disconnection. Its young protagonists set out to find why Tokyo is growing emptier by the day, and learn that malevolent spirits are entering our world through these portals. As suicides rack up and the shadow-drenched city – all stains, scratchy sound design and dissonant spaces – becomes more and more sinister, *Kairo* seeps wider and deeper until it feels apocalyptic. Along with Hideo Nakata's *Ringu*, this is the apex of J-horror.

BEST BIT A distorted ghost walks towards us in slow motion. Terrifying.



SHAUN OF THE DEAD 2004

06 A great comedy, yes, but also a great horror film. Raised on Raimi and Romero, Edgar Wright and star/co-writer Simon Pegg understand every trope of the zombie movie, and that's why *Shaun* is so effective. From having to brain friends and family before they turn, to the cathartic disembowelling of the arsehole in the group, the film doesn't stint on guts, emotional or literal.

Shaun's genius is to bring these familiar beats across the Atlantic. 'In American zombie movies, everyone had high-powered weapons,' pondered Wright. 'What would someone do without all that?' Hence the climactic siege takes place in the local pub, a zombie bite can be dealt with simply by 'running it under the tap', and the reaction to a blood-stained shirt is to politely point out that 'you've got red on you'.

BEST BIT The jukebox plays *Don't Stop Me Now*.



THE WITCH 2015

05 Suffused with dark magic, Robert Eggers' chiller was inspired by the 17th-century Salem Witch Trials, which took place near to where he grew up and haunted his childhood dreams. For his directorial debut, the former production designer strikes a rich seam of realism, using natural light, accurate sets and authentic (British) accents to anchor the more fantastical elements.

In 1630s New England, young Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy) and her god-fearing family are banished by the other settlers following a religious disagreement, and forced to fend for themselves in the unforgiving wilderness. But when their baby is stolen by *something*, it's not God who's pulling the strings. 'I wanted this film to be like a nightmare from the past,' said Eggers, 'like a Puritan's nightmare that you could upload into the mind's eye.' Amen to that.

BEST BIT 'Wouldst thou like to live deliciously?' asks a mysterious figure.



UNDER THE SKIN 2013

04 'The human skin in their [alien] eyes is similar to a carrier bag of shopping,' says director Jonathan Glazer, explaining how Scarlett Johansson's visitor perceives us. With inky style, Glazer's otherworldly chiller makes us see humanity and horror anew, unsettling audience certainties. Johansson's ET stalks Scotland, a predator seeking naturally occurring resources: men.

Glazer asserts his intent to derail perceptions right from his cosmic prologue, paring cinema down to the base matter of light, darkness, eyes... Johansson also takes shape before us, putting on new skin for stalking in. And when she brings home the bacon – 'vodsel', in source author Michel Faber's term – Glazer's gloopy abstract images suggest just enough of the abattoir to horrify. Surprise twists seed hints of hope for humanity, but not before Glazer has made us feel terribly small.

BEST BIT The baby on the beach haunts for years.



LAKE MUNGO 2008

03 Appearing out of nowhere like a face in the darkness, Australian writer/director Joel Anderson's insistently spooky 2008 debut lingers long in the mind. A fake documentary exploring the mutability of grief and truth, it introduces us to the Palmers, a family living in smalltown Ararat, Victoria, whose 16-year-old daughter, Alice (Talia Zucker), drowns while swimming at the local dam. Only Alice isn't really gone, returning to haunt them in dreams, home movies and old photographs as they try to process their loss.

Inspired by *Twin Peaks* and the eeriness of the Australian outback, Anderson presents a psychologically convincing ghost story shot through with a deep vein of dread. 'I like the idea of disquiet,' he said. 'I don't find jumping-out-of-the-closet moments scary.' To his credit, *Lake Mungo* isn't just disquieting; it's heartbreaking, too.

BEST BIT Alice captures something terrifying on her camera phone.

GET OUT 2017

02 Who would have thought a former puppeteer turned comedian who was best known for an Obama impersonation would make the most searing horror satire of the 21st century? Jordan Peele, with then barely-known British actor Daniel Kaluuya, brought to the screen a portrait of race in America, where Black bodies are prized while Black lives aren't.

Talented photographer Chris (Kaluya) somewhat reluctantly agrees to spend a weekend with his white girlfriend's family in upstate New York. At first, all he faces are microaggressions, but soon, things get dangerous. Part of Peele's mission was to acknowledge just how ridiculous the image of America being a post-racial utopia was. 'We're in the Obama presidency, and race was not supposed to be discussed,' he explained. 'It was almost like, if you talk about race, it will appear!'

Get Out not only got audiences to take in the unspoken horrors that African Americans face but also received love letters from critics, won Peele a well-deserved Oscar, and brought the Black horror genre back from The Sunken Place.

BEST BIT 'I would have voted for Obama a third time if I could.'





01

HEREDITARY 2018

Hail, Paimon! Ari Aster's petrifying debut has been crowned *Total Film*'s #1 horror movie of the 21st century; don't lose your head over it. Combining elements of *The Exorcist*, *Rosemary's Baby* and *Don't Look Now* into a ferociously effective new beast, *Hereditary* is a devastating family drama, where the everyday horrors of loss and grief are – in a way – even more distressing than a demon with a proclivity for shock decapitations. In a just world, Toni Collette's fiercely committed performance wouldn't only have been nominated for an Academy Award, she'd have won.

Exemplary through to its dizzyingly bleak finale, Aster's wildly assured script is matched by his

strikingly artful visuals, employing destabilising day/night match cuts and a dollhouse motif that takes on sinister new meaning with the foreknowledge that the Graham family are little more than playthings for an incomprehensible higher power.

After receiving ecstatic notices out of Sundance 2018 ('A modern-day horror masterpiece,' said *USA Today*) the myth of *Hereditary* was assured when the trailer accidentally played before a screening of *Peter Rabbit* in Perth, sending young families fleeing. 'It's just wonderful filmmaking,' said Martin Scorsese. 'It reminds me of the best of horror films.' You and us both, Marty.

BEST BIT Off with her head.

**AMER 2009**

Anyone with a love of Mario Bava and Dario Argento's giallo movies needs to see this gorgeously lurid Belgian-French homage. Death has never been so sensual.

**ANOTHER EVIL 2016**

If ghosts invade your holiday home, who you gonna call? Not this exorcist. A delightful horror-(cringe)com with likeable characters and consistent chuckles.

**ANTICHRIST 2009**

Arthouse meets torture porn in Lars von Trier's cabin-in-the-woods shocker. Punishment, forgiveness, ejaculating blood, a talking fox. Chaos reigns, indeed.

**BARBARIAN 2022**

Two strangers find they've double-booked an Airbnb. And that's the least of their problems in Zach Cregger's outrageous fright ride full of sharp left turns.

**THE BATTERY 2012**

Jeremy Gardner writes, directs and stars in a low-budget, existential zombie movie with real pathos. The extended one-take climactic sequence is extraordinary.

**DOG SOLDIERS 2002**

Soldiers v werewolves in Neil Marshall's raucously funny and super-gory calling card. The action is fast, furious and admirably gutsy: 'Sausages.'

**EVIL DEAD RISE 2023**

Lee Cronin relocates the gnarly action to a rundown LA tower block and gives us the best Evil Dead movie since the 80s. Now, where's our cheese grater...

**FASHIONISTA 2016**

Simon Rumley makes off-beam horror as imaginative as it is intense. This fractured breakdown of a clothes-obsessed woman would unnerve Nicolas Roeg.

**FRAILTY 2001**

The family that slays together... Bill Paxton's directorial debut locks onto a religious fanatic (Paxton himself) who forces his sons to join him in killing 'demons'.

**GERALD'S GAME 2017**

Mike Flanagan cracks Stephen King's 'unfilmable' novel about a woman left handcuffed to a bed after her hubby carks it during spicy lovemaking. One word: degloving.

**THE LOVE WITCH 2016**

A modern-day witch uses magic to bamboozle the patriarchy. Anna Biller wrote, directed and edited. She also handmade the spellbinding sets and costumes.

**MALIGNANT 2021**

A woman is paralysed by visions of murders. So far, so *Eyes of Laura Mars*. Then a *bonkers* final act accelerates James Wan's movie straight on to this list.

**MAY 2002**

A lonely, socially awkward young woman builds herself a friend. Like if *Carrie* was Victor Frankenstein. The dark humour will have you in stitches.

**PEARL 2022**

Set in 1918, during the Spanish Flu, Ti West's prequel to *X* nods to the Golden Age of Hollywood and features a deliriously unhinged Mia Goth in the title role.

**PONTYPOOL 2008**

A virus that's passed through language? This claustrophobic Canadian zombie flick is all talk (in a good way) and boasts a top turn by Stephen McHattie.

50 MORE OF THE GREATEST HORROR

SEEN THE TOP 50? NOW IT'S TIME TO COMPLETE THE 100...

**SCREAM 2022**

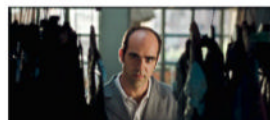
Just when you thought it was safe to go back to Woodsboro... This 'requel' repackages the essentials: smarts, scary set-pieces and Neve Campbell's Sidney.

**SESSION 9 2001**

Never mind a haunted house, how about a haunted psychiatric hospital? Brad Anderson turns the screws tight as things get freaky for an asbestos-cleaning crew.

**THE SKIN I LIVE IN 2011**

Spanish auteur Pedro Almodóvar applies his scalpel-sharp talents to an *Eyes Without a Face*-like tale of surgery, sex and shifting identities.

**SLEEP TIGHT 2011**

[Rec]'s Jaume Balagueró slows things down to a hold-your-breath standstill, as a doorman lets himself into a woman's apartment and sleeps under her bed.

**SPEAK NO EVIL 2022**

This bleak Danish offering will put you off ever making friends on holiday. The dread grows and grows until we reach the most horrific climax since *The Vanishing*.

**TRAGEDY GIRLS 2017**

As slick and postmodern as any *Scream* movie, this entertaining slasher-comedy focuses on two social-media obsessed teens. Should have been a mainstream hit.

**TRICK 'R TREAT 2007**

The most fun horror anthology since heyday *Amicus* - or at least since *Creepshow* - serves up serial killers, werewolves and more. There's warmth to the chills.

**US 2019**

Jordan Peele proved he was no one-hit wonder with this potent doppelgänger(s) movie full of nightmarish imagery. It's not outsiders who are terrifying, it's...

**VIOLATION 2020**

A troubled woman returns home and seeks revenge in one of the toughest films on the list. The rape-revenge sub-genre gets a morally complex, artistic overhaul.

**WE ARE THE FLESH 2016**

'Luis Buñuel spliced with Hieronymus Bosch,' yelped *TF* upon the release of this hellish vision. Provocative in the *extreme*.


CENSOR 2021

An 80s film censor views a video nasty that speaks to her own buried trauma. Prano Bailey-Bond's debut is an oppressive study of grief, guilt and gratuitous violence.


CLIMAX 2018

Spiced sangria whips a dance troupe into a bloodthirsty orgiastic frenzy in Gaspar Noé's danse macabre. Seems like the camera operator drank most of it.


CLOVERFIELD 2008

Found-footage movies normally seek intimacy and realism. Matt Reeves and J.J. Abrams applied the format to a giant monster movie. There goes New York...


THE CONJURING 2013

James Wan's super-slick suspense thriller thrust real-life paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren into spine-icing action, launching a cinematic universe.


A DARK SONG 2016

Sorcery and grief. This Irish occult horror starring Steve Oram and Catherine Walker should be much better known. A seriously atmospheric chamber piece.


HUSH 2016

A deaf and mute writer is terrorised by a masked man in her isolated house. Mike Flanagan has two other movies on this list, but this is his scariest offering.


THE INNOCENTS 2021

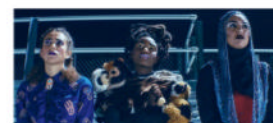
The cruelty of children is quietly explored as kids with dark powers begin to flex their abilities. A slow-burn Norwegian chiller that rightly became an international hit.


INSIDE 2007

Home alone, a heavily pregnant woman is besieged by a crazed Béatrice Dalle, who's after her baby. Grisly AF, with the technical control of a Fincher movie.


INSIDIOUS 2010

The successful horror franchise that James Wan and Patrick Wilson conjured up first. Haunted-house chills and an inspired jump-scare came from Darth Maul.


KNIVES AND SKIN 2019

All shadow, shimmer and synth soundscapes, Jennifer Reeder's beguiling teen noir evokes echoes of Lynch as a young girl disappears in a Midwest town.


[REC] 2 2009

Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza return to the quarantined building to deliver 90 dread-drenched minutes. *[Rec] 3* went for something different.


RESOLUTION 2012

Deconstructing genre tropes, the DIY debut of Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead (see also *Spring*, below) is a cabin-in-the-woods horror like no other.


REVENGE 2017

A hunting trip goes horribly south in this taut, stylish French thriller. Writer/director Coralie Fargeat brings a female perspective to the rape-revenge film.


THE RITUAL 2017

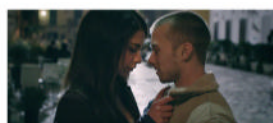
Bickering friends go hiking in Sweden and stumble into a superior creature feature. The reveal does that rare thing of matching the atmospheric build-up.


SAINT MAUD 2019

Rose Glass' attention-grabbing debut sees nurse Morfydd Clark try to save the soul of a dying patient. Think *Persona* meets *Repulsion*. The climax scorches.

OR FILMS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

WORDS JAMIE GRAHAM


SPRING 2014

Imagine, if you can, a walking and talking romantic drama in the Richard Linklater vein, spliced with H.P. Lovecraft or Andrzej Żuławski's *Possession*. WTF, basically.


THE STRANGERS 2008

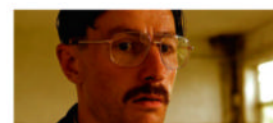
The poster child of modern home-invasion movies. When the victims ask their tormentors why they're doing this, 'Because you were home' is the chilling reply.


A TALE OF TWO SISTERS 2003

Two sisters, one creaking house, a creeping camera and masterful art direction make for a super-scary South Korean chiller.


THEM 2006

Many home-invasion movies are graphic and grim. This fast-moving French effort instead relies on intense suspense and is all the more terrifying for it.


TONY 2009

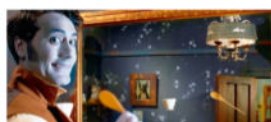
There are stylish, propulsive serial-killer movies, and there are grubby character studies. *Tony* squats firmly in the latter camp. Post-viewing shower obligatory.


WE ARE WHAT WE ARE 2013

An elegant US remake that actually improves on the original – in this case Mexican cannibal-family film *Somos lo que hay*.


WENDIGO 2001

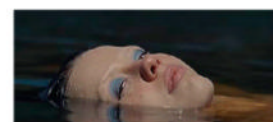
Producer/director/actor Larry Fessenden is a god of indie horror. *Wendigo* shows why, blending city folks' fear of rural locals with a folkloric monster tale. Brrr.


WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS 2014

'We drink virgin blood because it sounds cool.' Ace vampire mockumentary by Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi. See also the TV show.


THE WITCH IN THE WINDOW 2018

Writer-director Andy Mitton makes wonderfully delicate films. This is his best, a ghost story as a father and son flip an old Vermont farmhouse.


X 2022

Young filmmakers shooting a porno in rural Texas get cut down to size in Ti West's well-crafted ode to 70s slashers. Prequel *Pearl* was released later the same year.

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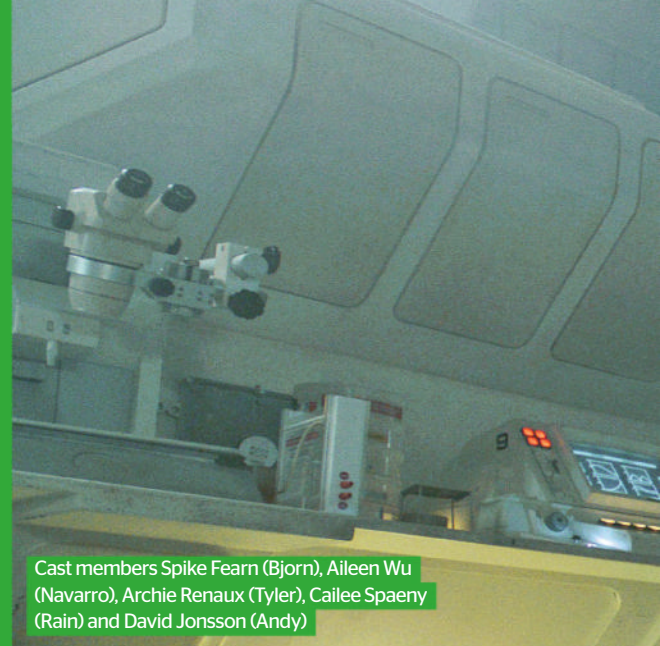
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SET BETWEEN *ALIEN* AND *ALIENS*, BACK-TO-BASICS INTERQUEL *ALIEN: ROMULUS* IS SYNTHESISING TWO SCI-FI HORROR MASTERPIECES INTO ONE PERFECT ORGANISM, WHILE BRINGING FRESH BLOOD TO THE SERIES. *TOTAL FILM* TAKES AN EXPRESS ELEVATOR TO HELL WITH DIRECTOR FEDE ALVAREZ, ALONGSIDE STARS CAILEE SPAENY, DAVID JONSSON AND ISABELA MERCED, TO DISCUSS THE NEXT CHAPTER FOR THE MOTHER OF ALL CREATURE FEATURES.

WORDS JORDAN FARLEY



Tyler and Rain prepare to face the xenomorph assault



Cast members Spike Fearn (Bjorn), Aileen Wu (Navarro), Archie Renaux (Tyler), Cailee Spaeny (Rain) and David Jonsson (Andy)

Fede Alvarez has a question for *Total Film*: 'What do you prefer, *Alien* or *Aliens*?' But before *TF* can respond with a well-rehearsed speech ('Objectively? They're both unimpeachable masterworks.

Subjectively? *Aliens* all day, baby!'), Alvarez reveals this is a hypothetical with a point. 'I think that's a perverse question,' the straight-talking Uruguayan filmmaker says over Zoom in late April. 'You should never be put through that choice.'

Alien: Romulus is his answer to that 'perverse question' of apples and oranges. Describing the film as 'an amalgamation of *Alien* and *Aliens* on many levels', everything from the environmental design to the pacing and the way the returning bestiary of Giger-accurate creatures is utilised in *Romulus* exists on a spectrum from the shadowy, slow-burn chills of *Alien* to the muscular, adrenalised thrills of *Aliens*.

'Every day we were like, "What movie are we making today?"' says star Cailee Spaeny (*Priscilla*, *Civil War*), who has the unenviable task of following Sigourney Weaver's Ellen Ripley as the new face of the series, while the xeno-slayer-in-chief is two decades into a peaceful 57-year hypersleep. "Are we making *Alien* or *Aliens*? What are we going to channel today?" Because they're so different in tone.'

The idea to smash together two famously divergent classics is inspired to the point that it's surprising no one else had thought to do it in almost 40 years. The

'I WANTED TO SEE THE XENOMORPH AGAIN, BUT IN THE SETTING OF A PURE-BLOOD HORROR MOVIE'

FEDE ALVAREZ

subsequent sequels may have much in them to recommend, but it's hard to argue with the fact that the *Alien* films reached their zenith with the first two instalments. And while the Ridley Scott-directed prequels are ambitious to a fault, the move away from interstellar terror towards more philosophically minded, horror-tinged sci-fi epics left ample room for a stripped-back return to *Alien* at its most primal.

'That was what I was missing, in a way,' says Alvarez, who has impressive form reimagining horror classics, having helmed 2013's vicious *Evil Dead* remake. 'It's not that there's no horror in *Prometheus* and *Covenant*, but they're not *horror* movies. The first one, above all, is a pure horror movie. Like Ridley says, he wanted to do *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in space. That's what I wanted; to see the xenomorph again, but in the setting of a pure-blood horror movie.'

Following the success of his horror thriller *Don't Breathe*, Alvarez found himself informally pitching this vision at Scott's production company Scott Free in 2017, during a general meeting with the legendary filmmaker. Drawn to the idea of an *Alien* movie featuring a fresh-faced line-up of xeno-victims-in-waiting, Scott and 20th Century Studios called on Alvarez and frequent collaborator Rodo Sayagues to start work on the script for *Romulus* several years later, in October 2021.

On their inspiration board throughout the writing process was a picture of Spaeny, who would go on to be cast as Rain Carradine. Speaking to *TF* from her home in Los Angeles, where framed movie posters adorn the wall – including an *Alien* quad opposite the sofa – Spaeny recalls an early, formative experience with Scott's classic. 'I have an initial memory of it being on in the house on a Saturday morning, and my dad watching it, and me going, "Oh, yeah. What's this about?"' Spaeny says, smile widening. 'And then the chestbuster scene coming up, and me going, "Oh my god, I cannot watch this." It was so traumatic. But then I'd slowly come back and peek...'

Spaeny's experience closely mirrors that of her co-stars, most of whom (prepare to feel like the desiccated husk of a Space Jockey) weren't born when the fourth instalment *Alien: Resurrection* was released in cinemas in 1997, so are catching up on the series many years after the fact. For Alvarez, the idea of centring the story on the series' first 20-something crew stemmed from an early scene in the Special Edition of *Aliens* in which Hadley's Hope is glimpsed before the fall, with young children playing in the corridors and riding around on Weyland-Yutani trikes.



Fede Alvarez spoke to Ridley Scott and James Cameron about their previous visions before tackling *Romulus*



'I always thought, "Wow, what would it be like for those kids to grow up in a terraforming colony that still needs another 50 years to be habitable?" You're probably going to take the same job as your parents. What's the hope?' questions Alvarez. 'Maybe it's because I'm from Uruguay and the idea of growing up in a place where you know how far you can get, and the things that happen there, and the things that will never happen there. So I always connected with those characters.'

THE KIDS AREN'T ALRIGHT

Hope is in desperately short supply on Jackson's Star, a Weyland-Yutani 'shake-and-bake' mining colony shrouded in perpetual night on the dark side of the planet, because there's no atmosphere (yet) to filter out their sun's radiation. Surface-bound for her entire life, 20-year-old Rain has never even seen natural light. 'We're trying to bring it back to these blue-collar people,' Spaeny says. 'We wanted the heart of it – where these kids came from – to feel authentic, as much as we possibly could.'

Rain's ex-boyfriend Tyler (Archie Renaux) and Bjorn (Spike Fearn) both work the mines and have a better reason than most to want to leave their futile lives behind. A lifeline arrives in the form of a decommissioned Weyland-Yutani space station – the *Renaissance* – which is pulled into orbit near Jackson's Star, offering the potential of a way out for any enterprising scavengers. Key to this mission ➡

'WE'RE TRYING TO BRING IT BACK TO THESE BLUE-COLLAR PEOPLE... WE WANTED THE HEART OF IT TO FEEL AUTHENTIC'

CAILEE SPAENY



The franchise's latest 'artificial person', Andy



Stars Archie Renaux, Caillee Spaeny and David Jonsson

►► are Bjorn's adopted sister Navarro (Aileen Wu) – the technically minded pilot of their rust-bucket vessel *Corbelan IV* – and Tyler's 'sweetheart' sister Kay (Isabela Merced).

'They're taking a shot at making their future a little bit better than what it looks like on their home planet,' says Merced, who has James Gunn's *Superman* (where she'll appear as Hawkgirl) and the second season of *The Last of Us* to come in 2025. 'They all have that desperation to find a better place. It makes it all the more upsetting and saddening when the movie ends how all Alien movies end...'

Also along for the ride are Rain and her surrogate brother Andy, aka ND-255. An 'artificial person', as Bishop would have it, Andy is the closest thing Rain has to family following the death of her parents. Their sibling connection, and the question of whether there can be a true familial love between a human and an android, is the emotional core of the movie according to Alvarez, and is tested under the most extreme circumstances when face-hugging, chest-bursting, pharyngeal-jawed hell inevitably breaks loose aboard the *Renaissance*.

'In the first one, obviously Ripley does not trust synthetics,' says Spaeny. 'And it's switched around where my character is doing everything she can to protect [Andy], because that's her only family.'

'It's rather beautiful, actually,' adds David Jonsson, the *Rye Lane* and *Industry* star making his studio-movie

debut with *Romulus*. 'It's a real first [for the series]. It adds a coming-of-age story. With *Alien*, you know that there's space, there's aliens, and you've got to kill them or be killed. Whereas with this wonderful brother-and-sister relationship, there's so much to play with.'

Like *Alien*'s Ash, Andy is a few transistors short of a circuit board. In one early scene glimpsed by TF, the synth freezes up in the middle of a facehugger attack, making him as much a liability as an asset. Jonsson initially auditioned for a 'smaller part' before being offered the role of Andy, and didn't take the responsibility lightly. 'I'm not going to lie to you, man. It does feel marginally intimidating,' says Jonsson, who is following Ian Holm (*Alien*), Lance Henriksen (*Aliens* and *Alien³*), Winona Ryder (*Alien: Resurrection*) and Michael Fassbender (*Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*) as the series' latest synthetic. 'It feels like you're standing on the shoulders of giants. But I understand why I'm here. There's a real big first with my synthetic. All those actors are brilliant at zooming in on fine detail, and I really do think that Fede gave me an opportunity to do that, which I hope comes across.'

Standing on the shoulders of giants couldn't apply more to Spaeny, for whom Ripley loomed large. 'I had her performance playing on repeat for months. I was sort of hoping that something would seep in,' Spaeny notes. 'But I never felt intimidated. That role wasn't written for a woman, so there was real freedom. And because Sigourney injected all of herself into it, that then opens up any other female who's entering this franchise into not ever feeling that weird weight or pressure of playing a female lead.'

Spaeny did allow herself to channel her inner Ripley for at least one scene: the *Aliens*-homaging moment glimpsed in the film's first trailer in which Rain steps off a cargo elevator while packing a proto-Pulse Rifle. 'In a shot like that, you've got to lean in. You just go, "OK. Get those leaf-blowers ready! I'm going to hit that mark as slow as I possibly can,"' she says with a chuckle. 'I don't feel that cool, but it definitely looks cool!'

KEEPING IT REAL

Filming from late March to early July 2023 at Origo Studios in Budapest, on the same colossal soundstages as *Dune*, *Poor Things* and *Blade Runner 2049*, Alvarez had a specific vision of how to make *Romulus* – one that didn't necessarily tally with the way studio movies are made now. 'You always have to pick your battles as a director, and those were the battles he chose to fight,' says

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Alien: Romulus is set between the first two movies in the series

Spaeny. 'It was: "I want this to be as practical as possible. I want to shoot in chronological order. And I want the same craftsmen and artists and puppeteers from the previous movies.'"

'We really went above and beyond to create a world that was exciting for me to be in,' Alvarez says – the opening salvo of a near-10-minute monologue to *TF*, such is his passion about the film's practically minded production, starting with the film's sprawling, interconnected sets. 'My movies are a bit of a theme park for the actors,' he explains. 'Because I attempt to create as many of the sets as I can, [linked] together, so that you can run through them for a long time – and there's no blue screens. Everything is a true experience for the actors. Hopefully that will translate to the audience's experience.'

Alongside production designer Naaman Marshall, Alvarez envisioned a subtle transition between the distinct design aesthetics of *Alien* and *Aliens* – from the used retro-future of the *Nostromo* to the cold industrialism of Hadley's Hope – as the film moves between the twin structures that make up the



GREAT EGG-SPECTATIONS

PRIOR TO PRODUCTION, ALVAREZ SPOKE AT LENGTH WITH JAMES CAMERON. HERE'S WHAT WENT DOWN...

'Cameron loved *Don't Breathe*. I think Stephen Lang showed it to him while shooting *Avatar*. So Cameron invited me to the set of *Avatar 2* just to show me all the technology. Four years later I was having a discussion with my co-writer Rodo [Sayagues] about what does Hudson mean by a "bug hunt" [in *Aliens*]? Does he mean that the Colonial Marines met some sort of alien life before? So I was like, "Well, I'll just ask the writer." I sent Jim an email, and he was thrilled to know that I was doing *Alien*. He was like, "Let's talk all about it."

'We had a long chat. At first, he was telling me a lot of what I wanted to hear. I had a lot of questions about him making *Aliens*, and all the challenges of going after Ridley's movie. It was a beautiful conversation. When we were talking about the story concepts, everything Cameron says is a golden nugget. He has such a scientific brain. I remember saying, "Does it make sense that a planet would have a dark side all the time?" He was like, "Absolutely. Actually, that's more common. Earth is very special..."

'But he was also talking about the engines of the ships, and if the engine is too big for the size of the ship, or too little. It's stuff like that. The spaces, the scope, the science fiction, the technology, the weapons – it was very focused on that, which I loved. He said, "I haven't done this in a long time, just sit down and brainstorm a horror-action thriller," a wild brainstorming of ideas in the *Alien* universe. And we had the privilege to do it with him and with Ridley. So what else would you want?' JF

MAKING OF

While presenting something new, *Romulus* also taps into the heritage of its predecessors



Isabela Merced plays Kay

➡ Renaissance space station: Romulus and Remus. And speaking of the gargantuan *Renaissance*, even that was built for real. 'We had Ian Hunter, who worked on *Total Recall* and *Interstellar*, build all the spaceships,' Alvarez grins. 'He's one of the last great masters of miniatures. What you see in the trailer is an ILM shot, but it was built by hand by Ian Hunter, and it was scanned, and turned into a CG asset. So it always has that handmade texture.'

But nowhere is Alvarez's commitment to 'practical where possible' more evident than with the film's

'THE MOVIE SHOULD NEVER WAKE YOU UP FROM THE DREAM'

FEDE ALVAREZ



The bond between Caillee Spaeny's Rain and David Jonsson's Andy is at the heart of the film

Director Fede Alvarez promises plenty of xeno-action, including some surprises

acid-blooded menagerie, the director claiming that 'all the creatures were built, and they worked'. Bluntly citing a desire to move away from the 'jumpy ninja shit' that an all-CG xeno allows for, Alvarez assembled a dream team of collaborators, including Shane Mahan and Alec Gillis – special-effects veterans who worked on *Aliens* early in their careers. In the face of financial sense, which dictates that one company handle all the work at a discounted rate, Alvarez split the labour: Mahan's Legacy Effects was responsible for all xenomorph matters, Gillis' Studio Gillis worked on chestbuster and egg effects, and Richard Taylor's team at Weta Workshop handled the concept design of the facehuggers and weapons manufacturing.

'We had an R.C. facehugger that you could drive around,' Alvarez recalls with a smile. 'I could chase people around. You'd see it coming, and it looks so fucking real – it was the scariest shit ever. [laughs] We had an animatronic xenomorph as well. Shane built the Queen on *Aliens* and said, half-jokingly: "This time we're going to get it right." Because all these years he's been thinking about the things he could have done better with the Queen, and how it didn't quite work.'

Admitting that 'it's way easier to just put up a tennis ball, and sometimes people can't tell it's CG', Alvarez – who has a background in visual effects and had no qualms about using CGI where it would make for a better shot – insisted on practical for 'close-up interactions'



where ‘nothing beats the real thing’. Animatronic technology has also evolved exponentially since the mid-80s, meaning that the mechanical xenomorph ‘could do a lot of things – it could move fast’, according to Alvarez, who also hints at unseen creatures to come.

‘There’s other things I cannot tell you about because it’d be a spoiler – and actually it’s what I’m most proud of,’ he teases. ‘There’s a thing in the movie that still, today, is the most fantastical thing I saw that’s part of the creature effects. Every time I watch it in the movie, it almost makes you think that it’s CG because it’s so out there. But it’s not. It’s 100% practical.’

Sometimes, the solutions were pleasingly old-school. ‘We also had a guy in a suit,’ Alvarez notes, with pride. ‘You know, sometimes the guy in a suit works perfectly well, and we needed that. There was even a moment where we had a small creature that we needed to do something. I thought it would be great for stop-motion animation, and we brought Phil Tippett in to do it. And Phil was thrilled to do it.’

When CGI did prove necessary ‘for scope’, shots were carefully conceived to be consistent with the film’s tangible special effects. ‘We made sure that the CG was built in a way as if it were a practical element so the creatures moved more like an animatronic than a CG creature,’ Alvarez points out. The director insists it was necessary to go ‘above and beyond’ in this way, even at the expense of a far more challenging and technical

shoot, in service of an experience where immersion for the audience is never broken.

‘When you watch the movie, it should never wake you up from the dream,’ Alvarez opines. ‘You should believe you’re on a spaceship, surrounded by these creatures, and everything feels real, and there’s nothing that takes you out of it and makes you think, “That’s got to be fake.” That is definitely the goal.’



Alien: Romulus focuses on 20-something characters facing a fight for survival





Calling the shots:
Director Fede Alvarez
on set

➤ FEAR FACTOR

For the cast, the presence of facehuggers, chestbursters and xenomorphs on all-encompassing sets may not have helped with their stress levels, but it made for a far more visceral and immediate shoot. 'Fede really insisted on us feeling the full spectrum of fear,' Merced recalls.

'I actually don't think the feeling ever got old of seeing a xenomorph in person and up close like that. It really shocked you every time, and sent a chill running up your spine. The details are so amazing.'

'When you're watching *Jurassic Park* or *Alien* or *Tremors* – that tangible puppet that is there, brings the film to life, in my opinion,' says Spaeny. 'And maybe that's just me, coming from an actor's perspective. But I hope that audiences will really understand why Fede fought for that, and that it actually does make a difference.'

Alvarez also returned to *Alien*'s playbook in one other crucial respect – the design of the xenomorph, which is almost entirely consistent with H.R. Giger's iconic biomechanical vision. Even the domed head, which James Cameron removed for *Aliens* (see boxout, below), has been reinstated. 'It is pretty faithful,' says Alvarez. 'We're really trying to take the designs back to the original

**'YOU CAN
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DAVID JONSSON

concept. We do embrace the biomechanical aspects of the creatures that were abandoned at one point. There is something about that that I find fascinating and scarier than if it's just an organic creature.'

As well as 'really trying to embrace the original concepts as close as possible', Alvarez sought to ground the violence in a way befitting of a modern horror movie. Take the film's extraordinarily gnarly chestbuster scene, which Alvarez equates to the most violent segment of *Planet Earth* never aired.

'It is done almost like a nature documentary,' he says of a sequence which required nine puppeteers to achieve. 'While we were seeing it on set we were joking, and trying to narrate it like Attenborough would. "The creature is coming out slow. It's looking for the scent of the mother..."' The creature's not trying to be scary. The creature is trying to get the fuck out of that cocoon, that happens to be a person. It's almost like this is more realistic in a way, but without betraying all the beautiful things of the original designs.'

'I really do believe that there are specific sequences in this film that will scar some kids that sneak into the movie for life,' claims Merced, who got a very up-close-and-personal view of one such sequence. 'You can definitely say goodbye to a 12A,' Jonsson adds with a hearty laugh. 'The halfway house with Fede is just not his style. If you're going to try to scare people, then you scare them.'

'He doesn't know how to not put that spin on it,' Spaeny notes, referencing *Don't Breathe* and his (literally) visceral reimagining of *Evil Dead*. 'That is just his instinct. He's waiting to do something strange and twisted. And you know he's got it when you're right on the edge of going, "Should we do this?" That's when you know, "OK, Fede is in his sweet spot."'

For Alvarez, the lofty goal with *Alien: Romulus* is to replicate the impact that the original film, and in particular the chestbuster sequence, had on unsuspecting audiences in 1979 – no easy feat at a time when unimaginable horrors are part of an everyday

ALIEN EVOLUTION

TRACKING THE XENOMORPH'S LIFE CYCLE, FILM BY FILM.



PROMETHEUS (2012)

Other than a puzzling appearance on a mural, the traditional xeno doesn't appear in Ridley Scott's first prequel. Instead, we get the Aethon/Deacon, born from the union of a tentacled Trilobite and an Engineer. Key features include a fully organic appearance, a goblin shark-style protrusible jaw and the fact it bursts out, almost fully grown, using the back of its pointed head.



ALIEN: COVENANT (2017)

As well as the back-bursting, throat-erupting Neomorph – a translucent-skinned, more humanoid beast with fangs but no second jaw – *Covenant* introduces the Praetomorph, a creature engineered by David. Missing most biomechanical features, and born in miniature (adorable), it's otherwise a close cousin of the xeno we know and, er, love.



ALIEN (1979)

'Kane's son', as Ash puts it (Daddy must be so proud...), is Swiss artist H.R. Giger's brainchild, featuring a near-transparent domed head, dorsal tubes, pharyngeal jaw and towering bipedal stance. Technically a common Drone, condoms, bottle caps and cooling tubes from a Rolls-Royce were incorporated into the suit to enhance the biomechanical nightmare.



ALIENS (1986)

As well as doing away with the dome for its Warrior xenos, replacing the head with a ridged cranium, James Cameron made minor tweaks to the hands, feet and spiked tail to give the xeno a more animalistic appearance. The Cameron-designed Queen is a whole different beast entirely, with a massive fanned head, structured double jaw, double-jointed legs and more.



ALIEN³ (1992)

Depending on your cut of choice – theatrical or assembly – *Alien³*'s Runner/Dragon has very different origins – hosted by a dog or oxen. As a quadruped it's far faster, is missing the dorsal tubes but reinstates the domed head, and has eerie lips, at director David Fincher's request. A webbed-clawed, Queen-spawning Royal Facehugger also appears in the assembly cut.



ALIEN: RESURRECTION (1997)

Other than dark brown skin and copious quantities of slime, the *Auriga* xenos only slightly alter the Giger/Cameron designs. The major changes come with the pale-skinned Newborn – a massive xeno hybrid with human features (including a horrifying/hilarious pointy nose). Practical genitals were built at Jean-Pierre Jeunet's request, but removed with VFX. **JF**



Practical creature design has been a priority – as has a return to Giger's original look

doomscroll. 'When you're young, you just feel so jealous about those stories. You're like, "Oh, man, I wish I could have been there the day no one expected it and the theatre went nuts,"' Alvarez says. 'So you want to make sure that it delivers on that promise, that you'll have people commenting on similar things to their friends, like, "Oof, that scene, man. I was there when it happened. I saw it."'

MYTH MAKING

Part of *Alien*'s mystique has always been its hints at a wider mythology – including the mysterious Space Jockey and its derelict ship – that were left unexplained... until *Prometheus* and *Covenant* provided answers no one really understood, let alone wanted. Perhaps pointedly, Alvarez claims 'there's not time to dwell on philosophy too much in this movie. The pace is so different. When you're running for your life in this very raw, survival-horror way, there's just no time to go there', before acknowledging that there will be organic 'connections' to every *Alien* movie, and even nods to extended universe stories including comics, books and games. 'It is there for the audience that is looking for it.'

The film's subtitle itself is the clearest indicator to expect more than a simple scare machine. Tying into Weyland-Yutani's 'obsession with imperialist iconography', it is referencing the creation myth of Rome by Romulus and Remus – siblings suckled by a she-wolf before Romulus committed fratricide on his twin brother. 'It's one of my favourite parts of the movie, the mystery of "What's beyond being chased by a creature?'" Alvarez says cryptically, revealing only that the *Renaissance* is a research station where xeno-experimentation was taking place, and that the title is 'directly related to something Weyland-Yutani is doing in the story this time'.

It all points to an *Alien* movie that is simultaneously familiar, while having something strikingly different to

'YOU WANT TO HAVE PEOPLE COMMENTING TO THEIR FRIENDS, "OOF, THAT SCENE, MAN! I SAW IT..."'

FEDE ALVAREZ

offer. 'It's a completely new take on it – like a really, completely new take on it – to the point that it's actually a little bit scary,' says Jonsson. 'As much as it is an homage to the original,' adds Merced, 'I feel that Fedé, as a fan, knew he wanted to see new things, and wanted to be the one to introduce them to the *Alien* world.'

But as Spaeny points out, first and foremost *Romulus* is a love letter to the series' two defining instalments. 'It was so much fun to, timeline-wise, place our story between one and two,' the star says with a grin. 'As a fan, you're able to connect the dots. So hopefully people can watch *Alien*, and then *Alien: Romulus*, and then *Aliens*. And that will be a satisfying thing.' The question of 'what do you prefer?' could soon get a lot more complicated.

ALIEN: ROMULUS IS OUT NOW.

Cailee Spaeny stars as 'Romulus' Ripley', Rain Carradine





WARNE PHOTOS, JACK DAWSON

DESERT POWER

LIKE A COLOSSAL SANDWORM RACING TOWARDS THE RHYTHMIC BEAT OF A THUMPER, *DUNE: PART TWO* IS UPON US. AND THIS TIME, IT'S WAR. *TOTAL FILM* RETURNS TO ARRAKIS WITH WRITER/DIRECTOR DENIS VILLENEUVE AND HIS (INTER)STELLAR CAST TO SPILL THE SPICE ON THE SCI-FI EVENT OF THE YEAR.

WORDS JORDAN FARLEY

Part Two sees the confrontation between Paul (Timothée Chalamet) and Feyd-Rautha (Austin Butler)



The word Muad'Dib has several meanings in the world of *Dune*. It is both a small, saucer-eared mouse that scurries across the desolate surface of Arrakis, and the chosen Fremen name of Paul Atreides, symbolising his destiny as one wise in the ways of the desert. For *Dune* director Denis Villeneuve and his star Timothée Chalamet, the word has added significance – 'Muad'Dib time' was the message Villeneuve sent Chalamet when *Dune: Part Two* got

the greenlight in October 2021.

'There were moments over the course of shooting the first film where I was yearning for Paul, after he left Caladan, to not still be in the process of formation,' Chalamet explains, speaking to *Total Film* in early January, tousled hair screen-perfect even for a Zoom call. 'My most common way of expressing that was: "When does Paul become Muad'Dib?" [Denis] would always preach patience. In sending me that text, it was clear that this is the story where we would see Paul come into his own.'

Long-awaited following that agonising cliffhanger and an excruciating, strike-related delay; *Dune: Part Two* is the concluding instalment of Villeneuve's breathtakingly tactile rendering of Frank Herbert's seminal 1965 novel. *Part One* was a rare genre blockbuster embraced by audiences and typically sniffy awards bodies, cleaning up in the technical categories at the 2022 Oscars by winning best cinematography, editing, sound, visual effects, production design and score.

The decision to split the film in two ultimately proved as wise as the humble Muad'Dib – ask David Lynch who had a paltry 45 minutes to cover the same ground as *Dune: Part Two* in his critically compromised 1984 adaptation – but it was a risky strategy that meant, until those opening weekend numbers came in, a conclusive sequel was far from guaranteed.

'When I was shooting [*Part One*], I remember saying to myself, "If that's the only movie, I want to be at peace." So I gave everything,' Villeneuve recalls during a conversation with *Total Film* in Madrid, where the life-long fan of Herbert's novel has just screened the first 12 minutes of *Dune: Part Two*, and further select scenes, in all their IMAX glory to a mouth-agape *TF*. 'Of course, for me, it was not about box office. It was about: do people feel that you have been a traitor [to the novel], or does the world accept your adaptation? I felt that it was a "yes", and that I was able to go on to make *Part Two*.'

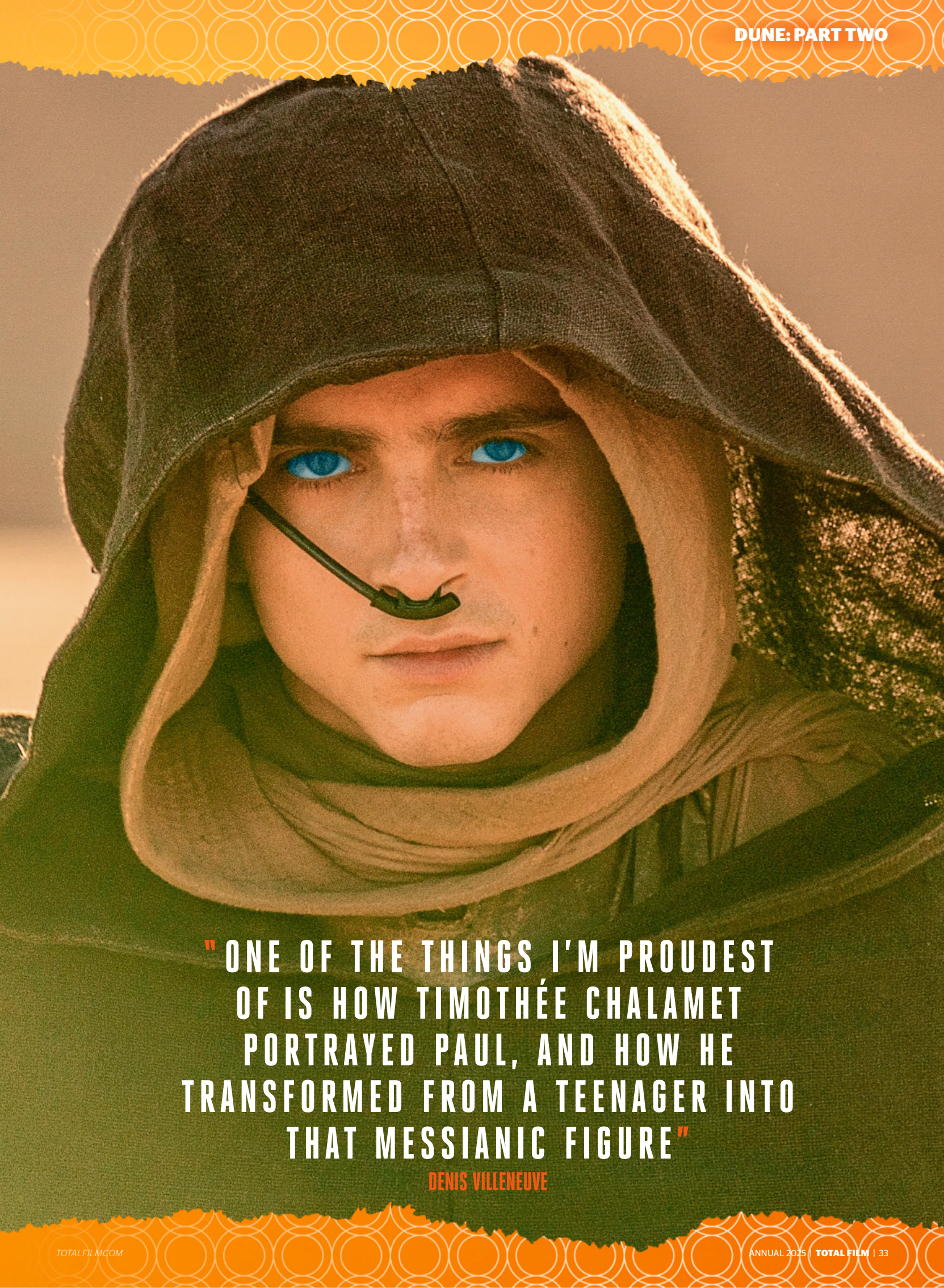
CULTURE SHOCK

Co-writing the film's script with returning screenwriter John Spaihts, Villeneuve describes the process of adapting *Part Two* as 'more challenging' than their work on the world-building first instalment because 'storytelling-wise, it's more dense'. Much of that complexity can be attributed to the fact that Paul and his Bene Gesserit mother Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson) fully embrace Fremen culture in *Part Two*, having earned their place among the community of Sietch Tabr, under the leadership of Javier Bardem's Stilgar. Then there's the small matter of Paul stepping into his cataclysmic fate as prescient super-being the Kwisatz Haderach, and all that entails for the future of their world.

'One of things that I'm proudest of is how Timothée Chalamet portrayed Paul, and how he transformed in front of the camera from a teenager into that messianic figure – a ➤➤



Javier Bardem returns as Fremen leader Stilgar



"ONE OF THE THINGS I'M PROUDEST
OF IS HOW TIMOTHÉE CHALAMET
PORTRAYED PAUL, AND HOW HE
TRANSFORMED FROM A TEENAGER INTO
THAT MESSIANIC FIGURE"

DENIS VILLENEUVE



Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson)
continues to fight for her son

➡➡ tormented young man trying to deal with his destiny,' says Villeneuve. 'There are scenes where he has to scream in Fremen in front of hundreds of [supporting artists],' adds Ferguson. 'That's scary. And the resonance with which he does it, and the power with which he does it – it was mesmerising.'

'It doesn't make his journey so righteous,' says Chalamet, who describes the process of playing Paul over four years as a 'surreally lived-in experience' having 'come into his own' as a person in parallel with the character. 'That's what Frank Herbert's warning really was, in not only *Dune*, but [sequel novel] *Dune Messiah*. To be wary of charismatic leaders; to be wary of people that hold too much power. That's something Paul wrestles with in the second movie, where he's actively resisting a certain path that calls on him to be a complete leader, because he knows what comes with it.'

The Fremen are initially sceptical of Paul, but many come to believe he is their long-prophesied 'Lisan al Gaib' (off-world saviour), including Stilgar. 'In the beginning, he doesn't really know if he trusts this new kid. But he wishes he will be The One...' Bardem tells *TF*. 'Something changes, and then there is a blind faith – as with many religions.' Bardem made an outsized impression as Stilgar in *Part One*, despite appearing

on screen for approximately 12 seconds. It was the promise of *Part Two* – and a pledge that he'd get to ride a sandworm ('Denis kept his word,' Bardem smiles) – that made Villeneuve's initial offer irresistible.

'Denis said, "I'm going to offer you a movie that you are not in, but if there is a second one, you will be in it." I was like, "I'm in!"' chuckles Bardem, who has a much more significant role to play in *Part Two*. 'It was a different game for me. It was a chance to be more immersed in the process, and to develop the character to a beautiful, vulnerable place.' Stilgar finds he is united in belief with Jessica, 'two people who are very religious in their way' according to Ferguson. 'The moment that she realises Stilgar believes in her son – there's nothing stronger for her. That sets the bar for their relationship.'

SAND-STRUCK ROMANCE

In contrast to Stilgar and Jessica, Zendaya's Fremen Chani may believe in Paul as a person, and even come to love him, but she puts no stock in prophecies. 'In the book Chani meets Paul and is like, "Alright, this is the guy. I support you." Whereas in our film, in no way does she bend how she feels,' says Zendaya, who 'longed' for more time in the world of *Dune* after filming

"EVEN WHEN CHANI
IS FALLING IN LOVE,
SHE STILL DOESN'T
LIKE WHAT PAUL
REPRESENTS"

ZENDAYA



for little more than a week on *Part One*. 'She's strong in her convictions. Even when she's falling in love, she still doesn't like what [Paul] represents.'

Chalamet describes Chani as Paul's 'moral compass', while according to Villeneuve 'the core of this film is the love story between Paul Atreides and Chani', which may account for the director's claim that *Part Two* is his most 'emotional' movie to date. This star-crossed romance, which is kindled in the magic-hour glow of the deep desert in Abu Dhabi and Jordan – enough to make anyone fall in love – grounds a gargantuan story about worlds at war according to Zendaya. 'Because it's so high-stakes you have to go back to something that's really human, which is love,' the actor says. 'It's something everyone can relate to, and feel connected to.'

Like Stilgar then, Chani's limited role in *Part One* will be greatly expanded in *Part Two*, even beyond the scope of the novel, with Villeneuve claiming that 'as the movie progresses, there's a shift in the main character, and Chani becomes my reference as a point of view'. Zendaya notes that 'what Denis does very well is take the female characters more deeply into consideration' in a way that was rarely the case for science-fiction in the 60s. 'He was really able to build out a strong sense of [Chani's] own views and life. It wasn't entirely like she's at the will of who she's in love with. I did feel a particular sense of care for what Chani represents in his films.'

Jessica similarly benefits from this sense of care. Villeneuve even highlights her increased presence as the single biggest difference between the novel and his adaptation. 'Strangely, Jessica's more in the background in the second part [of the novel] – I thought that was not proper,' he asserts. 'She's still Lady Jessica, the main architect of the story. I thought that was a very powerful idea that was not sustained in the book. I made sure that she has the character presence in the second part.'

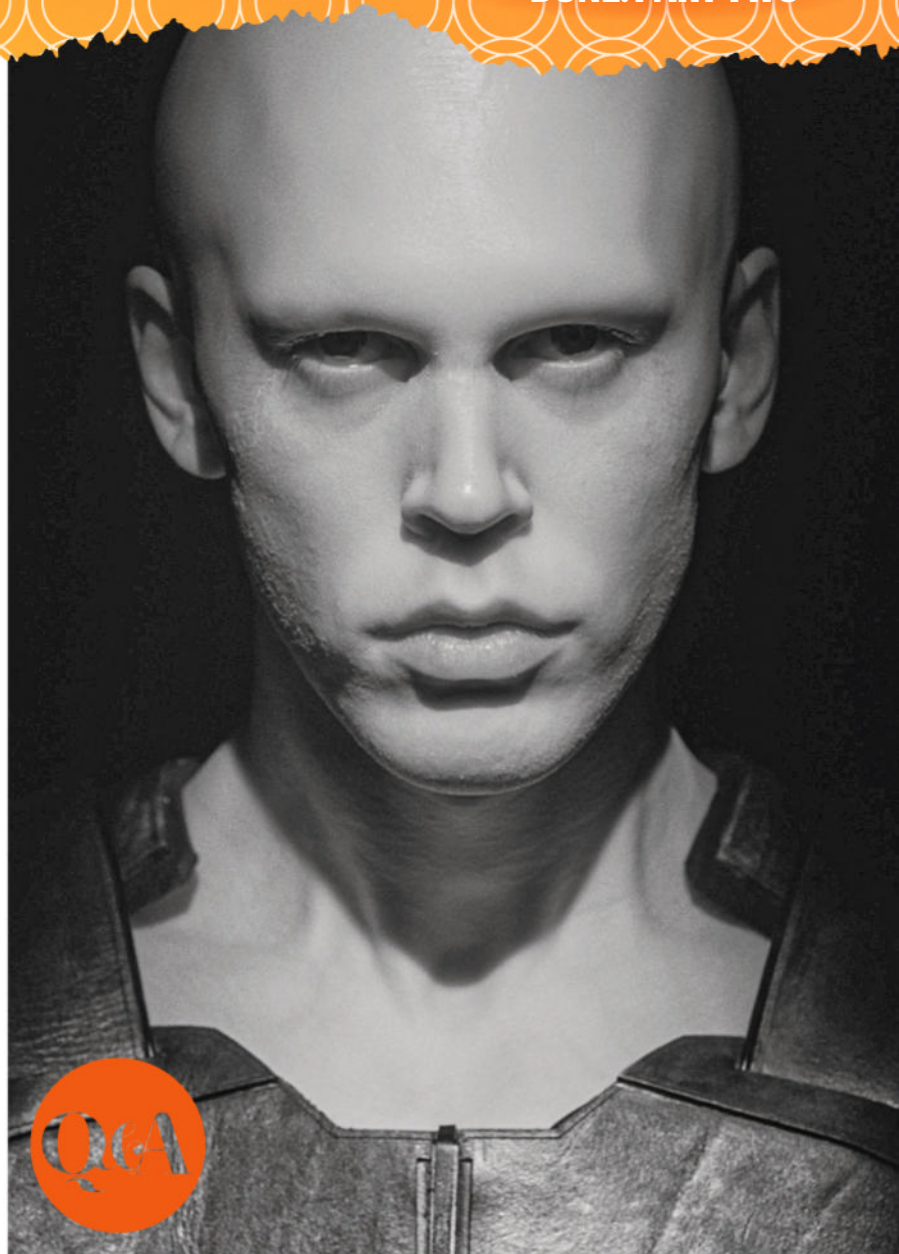
'Jessica wants to protect Paul, but constantly has her own agenda,' Ferguson points out, speaking to *TF* on a day off from filming the second season of Apple TV+ series *Silo*. 'She will go on her own journey to fight and gather strength in a different form.' As Bardem explains, Jessica becomes a 'powerful, religious figure in the Fremen world that really is able to manipulate people's beliefs' after undertaking a dangerous ritual involving the Waters of Life. 'That's one of my favourite scenes [in the film],' Ferguson smiles. 'For Jessica, no decision is made without understanding the harsh – sometimes lethal – consequences of that choice. But she's forced to try to take control back.'

There's also Jessica's pregnancy to consider, which has paradigm-shifting consequences in the world of *Dune*. It's the only topic Villeneuve won't go near today ('I need to keep some mystery,' he says with a smile), but Ferguson offers a cryptic tease: 'Having a Bene Gesserit pregnant, we can say, is not like me being pregnant. It's a whole other journey.'

FRIENDS REUNITED

House Atreides suffered a number of significant losses during *Part One*'s climactic massacre, masterminded by Baron Harkonnen (Stellan Skarsgård). But it isn't just Paul and Jessica who survived – revenge against the Harkonnen is front of mind for Gurney Halleck (Josh Brolin) once he's reunited with Paul. 'It's very personal to him,' says Brolin, who turned to the novel to inform Halleck's backstory. 'But he doesn't think he's in a position where he can enact revenge until that surprise happens, and he can get back on a trajectory that he's very comfortable with.'

Brolin got to fulfil two years-in-the-making dreams on *Dune: Part Two* – a proper scene with Javier Bardem ('Denis



FEYD TO BLACK

Austin Butler on *Dune: Part Two*'s deadly, charismatic Harkonnen assassin...

How did Denis pitch Feyd-Rautha to you?

Denis described him to me as having a psychotic nature, but yet there's something sort of seductive about him as well. And he's hungry for power. I started thinking: well, how did he grow up? What would his voice sound like? How would he breathe? How would he move? That was the real fun, where you start filling in all those details, and putting meat on the bone.

You famously immersed yourself in Elvis Presley. Could you have done that with Rautha?

With Feyd, I didn't think it would be healthy to live in that head-space 24 hours a day. So I created rituals around it in the hair and make-up chair where I could start shifting my mind over. That allowed more freedom to feel that I could go further in the film, because I knew that it wasn't going to get out of hand. Once you know that, then it's so much fun, because he's so different from me. There's a challenge in that, but there's something liberating about immersing yourself in this other way of being. There were possibilities that don't exist with other characters that were very fun to explore.

Sting famously donned a winged codpiece to play Feyd-Rautha. Did you lobby for the pants to make a return?

I think he did them so much justice that I had to do something completely of my own [laughs]. How do you follow that? I think he looks great in them... I love that movie, and I love Sting as a musician and as an actor. I feel honoured to be embodying this role that he had the opportunity to. **JORDAN FARLEY**



Chani (Zendaya) believes in Paul, but not the prophecies about him



Léa Seydoux joins the cast, playing Bene Gesserit Lady Margot

➤ wrote a scene of dialogue for us, because we both said, “On *No Country for Old Men*, we didn’t share the screen. Give us a scene!””

Bardem chuckles), while Gurney will finally break out the nine-stringed baliset after a performance filmed for *Part One* was left on the cutting room floor. ‘Tonally, he was right [to cut] the first one,’ Brolin nods. ‘This one, the placement is right.’

I wrote the lyrics, and Hans [Zimmer] wrote the music. I didn’t think the scene would turn out as well as it did, but I’m really happy with it.’

Brolin has nothing but praise for the film after a recent screening, in particular the ‘great new blood that enlivened what may have turned out to be like going back to Season 2 of a series’. Chief among the new additions is Austin Butler (see boxout p35), who drops all hints of that lived-in Elvis performance and dons an impressive bald cap, as Feyd-Rautha – a psychotic Harkonnen killer, and favoured nephew of the Baron.

‘Feyd is a mirror of Paul. He’s a perfect nemesis,’ teases Villeneuve, who cast Butler in spring 2022 after Baz Luhrmann gave him a sneak peek at his star-making turn as the King of Rock and Roll. ‘I was mesmerised by his charisma. I was seduced. It was,

in some ways, a gamble. But when we did the make-up test and the first day of shooting, I was moved to tears by what he brought to the screen. I was like, “Oh my god, it’s 10 times better than I was expecting.””

With all due respect to Skarsgård and Dave Bautista, who returns as blunt instrument Glossu ‘The Beast’ Rabban, the Harkonnens don’t exactly trade on their good looks, but Feyd-Rautha has a dangerous allure that makes him the ‘rock star of the family’ according to Villeneuve. ‘He’s the beautiful Baron nephew. A playboy. A very sexy, charismatic, psychotic killer,’ Villeneuve grins. ‘There’s something erotic about it. Everybody needs to be moved by his beauty. And Austin was perfect for that.’

Rautha himself is seduced by Léa Seydoux’s newcomer Lady Margot who, like any good Bene Gesserit, has her own plans within plans (‘It was amazing to see her in full power,’ smiles Butler). Then there’s Christopher Walken’s ruthless Padishah Emperor Shaddam IV, and his scheming daughter Princess Irulan (Florence Pugh, see p38), who are out to stop Paul before he can become a threat to the Golden Lion Throne. As for the Baron, he names Rautha heir apparent to House Harkonnen following the near-fatal encounter with Duke Leto in *Part One*.

‘He’s weakened by the poisoning, and knows that he has to find a replacement,’ says Skarsgård, who’s far cheerier

Stellan Skarsgård is back in the make-up chair as Baron Harkonnen





Dave Bautista is back
as 'The Beast'

in person than his on-screen counterpart. 'The Baron, he almost falls in love with Feyd-Rautha. He's a wonderful killer. He adores him, in a way. But, of course, if he would get out of line, he wouldn't hesitate to kill him...' As with the first film Skarsgård spent hours in the make-up chair every morning to become the bulging Baron, a gruelling process for any actor. 'Of course, I really didn't want to put on that shit again. It really hurt!' the actor chuckles. 'But, in a way, it's worth it.' One silver lining this time: fewer nude scenes. 'The nakedness means two more hours in the chair. It cut it down to six hours for me.'

Studying Skarsgård's performance as the Baron in order to locate Feyd-Rautha's feral voice, Butler imagined the influence he must have exuded over Rautha in youth. 'There's a sense of growing up with the Baron, and seeing his power, and being envious of his power,' Butler explains. 'I mean that in the Shakespearean sense of when you may love somebody, but may want to kill them at the same time, and take the power. But you have to do that in a wise way, because otherwise it will be taken from you. The constant Machiavellian back-and-forth is definitely a part of their relationship.'

FIGHT CLUB

Butler's introduction to *Dune* was a testing one for the actor, in which Rautha fights captured Atreides soldiers in a gladiatorial arena – the Harkonnen idea of a birthday celebration, no less – on his homeworld of Giedi Prime. Villeneuve had a clear vision for the polluted planet from the script writing stage, one which ties neatly into *Dune*'s broader ecological themes. 'Giedi Prime is an industrial world,' Villeneuve explains. 'I loved the idea that in different worlds, the laws of physics could be different. Maybe there are some stars in the universe where the light doesn't reveal colours; it's the opposite, it kills colours. I thought a black-and-white world would fit with their primitive mentality.'

Rather than simply desaturating the image in post, an otherworldly effect was achieved by strapping infrared lenses to the large-format cameras. 'It wasn't something that was done in VFX; it was done as we were shooting,' notes Villeneuve, who captured 100% of *Part Two* in an expanded IMAX aspect ratio, as opposed to just '35-40%' of *Part One*. 'I explained to the studio that: "We shoot it this way, and there's no way we can go back." They signed with their blood [laughs]. But it created a very powerful, eerie feeling that I love.'

'I was able to see playback of the infrared [as we were filming],' Butler recalls. 'I'd never seen anything like that before. It makes your eyes look like a shark. It's wild.' The result is undeniably striking, but the filming of the arena scene was challenging in other ways. 'That was the first sequence filmed for *Dune: Part Two*,' Butler notes. 'It was extremely hot in Budapest at that time – 110°F. We were filming in what was

"THE BARON, HE ALMOST FALLS IN LOVE WITH FEYD-RAUTHA. HE'S A WONDERFUL KILLER. HE ADORES HIM, IN A WAY" STELLAN SKARSGÅRD



Director Denis Villeneuve
on set with Javier Bardem
and Josh Brolin



FIT FOR A PRINCESS

Florence Pugh is *Dune* royalty

How would you describe Princess Irulan?

I don't think I've played anyone quite like her before, partly because I've played a lot of gobby and opinionated women! She's someone that is constantly listening and constantly watching. She's learning in every single scene. She's constantly plotting, and that is probably one of the most exciting things about her – she's figuring out a future.

Irulan is a comparatively small part of the novel, how did you feel about that?

It so didn't matter. Last year, I just really wanted to be a part of great, epic movies. It didn't matter how big my role was. I got to do that with *Oppenheimer*, and I got to do that with *Dune*. When I chatted to Denis, he kept apologising, and saying, 'In this one, it's really not a big part. I won't be offended [if you say no].' I was like, 'I don't care! I just want to come and watch you work. This is a dream.'

What is Irulan's relationship to the Emperor?

Oh my god, I got to work with Christopher Walken. Their relationship is very beautiful. It's a father/daughter relationship like no other, because he's the Emperor, and he owns the world. He's a very intelligent leader that is training his child to be just as brilliant and just as smart as him. I'm not saying it's all rainbows. But you can see that there's love there.

Your costumes seem out of this world, even by *Dune's* standards...

I love having relationships with the costume designers. They are more obsessed with your character than you are sometimes, which is thrilling. And then I get the role of Princess Irulan, and I'm like, 'Oh my god, yes. I'm going to be now wearing those crazy, amazing costumes.' I definitely had that with my chainmail dress outfit. It was so exciting to put on. But we'd go in at 5am. You have to put it on bare skin, but obviously it's metal and it had been in the warehouse all night. My goodness, it was cold. **JORDAN FARLEY**

➤➤ basically a grey box with 200ft walls and sand. So it created a microwave, essentially. There were people who passed out from heat stroke. But I was so grateful to start with that sequence because it was physical. You're not in your head. I was able to prepare for six months for that, and then go out there, and fight for a week-and-a-half.'

This combat-heavy start to the production set the tempo for what Villeneuve says is 'more of an action film' and a 'more muscular' movie compared to the 'meditative and contemplative' opening instalment. 'The way I think about it is, *Part One* was like tossing the ball in the air, and this one's the baseball bat coming through and cracking it,' Chalamet says with a grin. For Zendaya, it was an opportunity to get her hands dirty after years of eagerly observing from the sidelines. 'I've watched through many-a-*Spider-Man* how much effort goes into creating these sequences,' the actor points out. 'I was like, "Damn, I want to get out there, and kick some butt!"' The trailers tease warfare on a planetary scale, with Fremen shooting down ornithopters from atop sandworms. 'When you see the battles here you go, "I haven't seen that before." It's crazy,' says an animated Bardem.

What sets the action in *Dune* apart from most blockbuster tentpoles (other than, you know, sandworms) is that

every 'big set-piece has real lived-in stakes behind it' according to Chalamet. The perfect example is Paul's first worm-ride (see boxout p41), which is brought to the screen in jaw-droppingly visceral fashion in *Dune: Part Two*. The outrageously dangerous ritual is a rite of passage among the Fremen, and a turning point in Paul's journey. 'Beyond being an exciting sequence in the movie, it represents a coming of age,' says Chalamet. 'It's where Paul's supposed prophecy would fall flat, and it would mean his death if he can't rise to the occasion. So the stakes of that moment are huge, and the doing of it was thrilling. It was industrial fans blowing sand, and a slab of worm was built. It was an amazing experience.'

Envisioning exactly how a human is supposed to mount a skyscraper-sized beast in the open desert was one of the first problems Villeneuve tackled on *Part Two*. 'When you read the book your brain is connecting the dots, but what's the technique?' the director asks. 'I needed to show the logic of how to ride a worm, and the danger. But, at the same time, Paul needs to be good! To create that fine balance is fun because, as a filmmaker, I never had the chance to show the birth of a hero.'

Worm-riding is far from the only test Paul will face in *Dune: Part Two*, there's also Feyd-Rautha waiting at the end of a long and dangerous road for a trailer-teased mano a mano fight. 'That was definitely one of those sequences that we gave a ton of attention to,' Butler says. 'Our lives are in the other's hands, in a way – we did a lot of work together.'

Florence Pugh dons chainmail as the Emperor's daughter, Princess Irulan



"IT WASN'T ENTIRELY LIKE SHE'S AT
THE WILL OF WHO SHE'S IN LOVE WITH.
I DID FEEL A PARTICULAR SENSE OF
CARE FOR WHAT CHANI REPRESENTS"

ZENDAYA



Villeneuve and Ferguson discuss her attempt to blend in with the scenery

"FOR JESSICA, NO DECISION IS MADE WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING THE HARSH - SOMETIMES LETHAL - CONSEQUENCES OF THAT CHOICE"

REBECCA FERGUSON



Gathering forces in the desert

➤ 'We started kali fight training independently in Los Angeles,' Chalamet adds. 'We went after it, man. We were super-motivated. It was inspiring [working with Austin]: how lasered-in he was, and how dark his character was. It really brought purpose to the mission that Paul goes on. That the universe is in better hands with him than with Feyd-Rautha.'

For their showdown, Paul and Rautha have one hell of an audience, with practically the entire top-billed cast of the film assembling in one huge room for the two-or-so weeks it took to shoot, even though many A-listers and legends were required to do little more than watch from the sidelines. 'That was really quite an exciting room to be in. Anywhere you looked, there was an unbelievable actor,' says Pugh, who Villeneuve cautions has limited screen time in *Part Two*, but would have a much larger role to play in any potential sequel. 'The immediate inspiration there is that everyone has shown up to tell this story,' adds Chalamet. 'And everyone is 100% prepared and committed to building the world of *Dune* for Denis Villeneuve.'

MUSIC MAESTRO

That commitment extended behind the camera to the heads of department, almost all of whom return for

RIDE OR DIE

Production visual effects supervisor Paul Lambert on bringing worm-riding to the screen.

'The first Zoom call on *Dune: Part Two* was: "How the heck are we going to do the sandworms?" Denis came up with this amazing idea. They call a worm when they're on a big dune. The worm comes, and it goes for the thumper. It goes through the dune, and then the character falls from the dune onto the worm. There were multiple conversations as to how we were going to pull this off. It was a whole combination of different techniques.

'We got a tonne of sand in the desert and, in a controlled area, we were able to build the peak of a dune. And then we had three tubes which were being pulled by these crazy, industrial tractors. And as the stunt person is running it's all timed so that the tubes get pulled, the sand collapses, he falls down - and then, after that, [visual effects] take over, as we go into a dusty environment.

'We then built a partial worm on a gimbal. It was a lot of stunt-team work, but then Timothée also did it. They'd be holding the hooks on the worm, and we would bounce the gimbal. Greig [Fraser] wanted everything backlit, so we would rotate everything, chasing the sun to get that interactivity with the character as he's moving. And then we'd add additional digital sand and the surrounding dunes, bringing all of that into one cohesive image.' **JORDAN FARLEY**

Part Two following their fêted work on the first film, including cinematographer Greig Fraser, costume designer Jacqueline West, production visual effects supervisor Paul Lambert, editor Joe Walker and production designer Patrice Vermette, whose sets are described with enthusiastic reverence by the entire cast. 'These massive spaces are so mind-blowingly constructed... it really inspires a feeling of awe,' says Butler.

But few went as far as composer Hans Zimmer. Much like Villeneuve, Zimmer is a life-long fan of the book, and basically never stopped working after the first film was completed, writing 90 minutes of brand new music simply to get Villeneuve in the mood for writing *Part Two*'s screenplay.

'I remember at one point, he called me, and said, "Denis, listen to this. You're going to love this,"' Villeneuve recalls. 'I said, "Hans, it's absolutely fantastic music. I deeply love it. But we released the film six months ago!" He was still scoring non-stop. And he's doing the same right now, by the way. It's by far the

best score I've had in my life, and in *Part Two* the score is even stronger than *Part One*. I can say that with confidence.'

There's a reasonable chance that Zimmer is still writing *Dune* music as you read this, months after Villeneuve locked picture on *Part Two*, perhaps to get the filmmaker in the mood for writing *Part Three* - an adaptation of sequel novel *Dune Messiah*. Once again, nothing is promised, begging the question: will Villeneuve be 'at peace' if *Part Two* is the end of his time on Arrakis? 'I will say that there's something that's complete, that all of the elements are there,' Villeneuve nods. 'But I think the movie adaptation is more tragic than the book. There's something more heartbreaking. The way that *Part Two* ends... it would create a total balance and equilibrium to finish Paul's storyline in what we could say is *Part Three*.'

If the cast have discussed a third film with Villeneuve, they're keeping quiet for now. 'Denis is an artist, and doesn't like to share things until he's got it figured out. So whenever he's ready, we're all keenly ready to hear what his vision is,' says Zendaya. 'The idea excites me very much,' adds Chalamet, who has yet to receive the crucial greenlight text from Villeneuve. 'If the time and opportunity comes to complete the story with *Messiah*, I think we're all super-enthusiastic about that.' **JORDAN FARLEY**

DUNE: PART TWO IS OUT NOW.

Feyd-Rautha is the Baron's devoted nephew...





LOVE MATCH

Zendaya, Josh O'Connor and Mike Faist play tennis and wicked games in *Challengers*, Luca Guadagnino's sensual study of fierce friendship, competition and messy love triangles. *Total Film* sits down with the three champs as they serve up on sex scenes, tennis camp and *Ratatouille*.

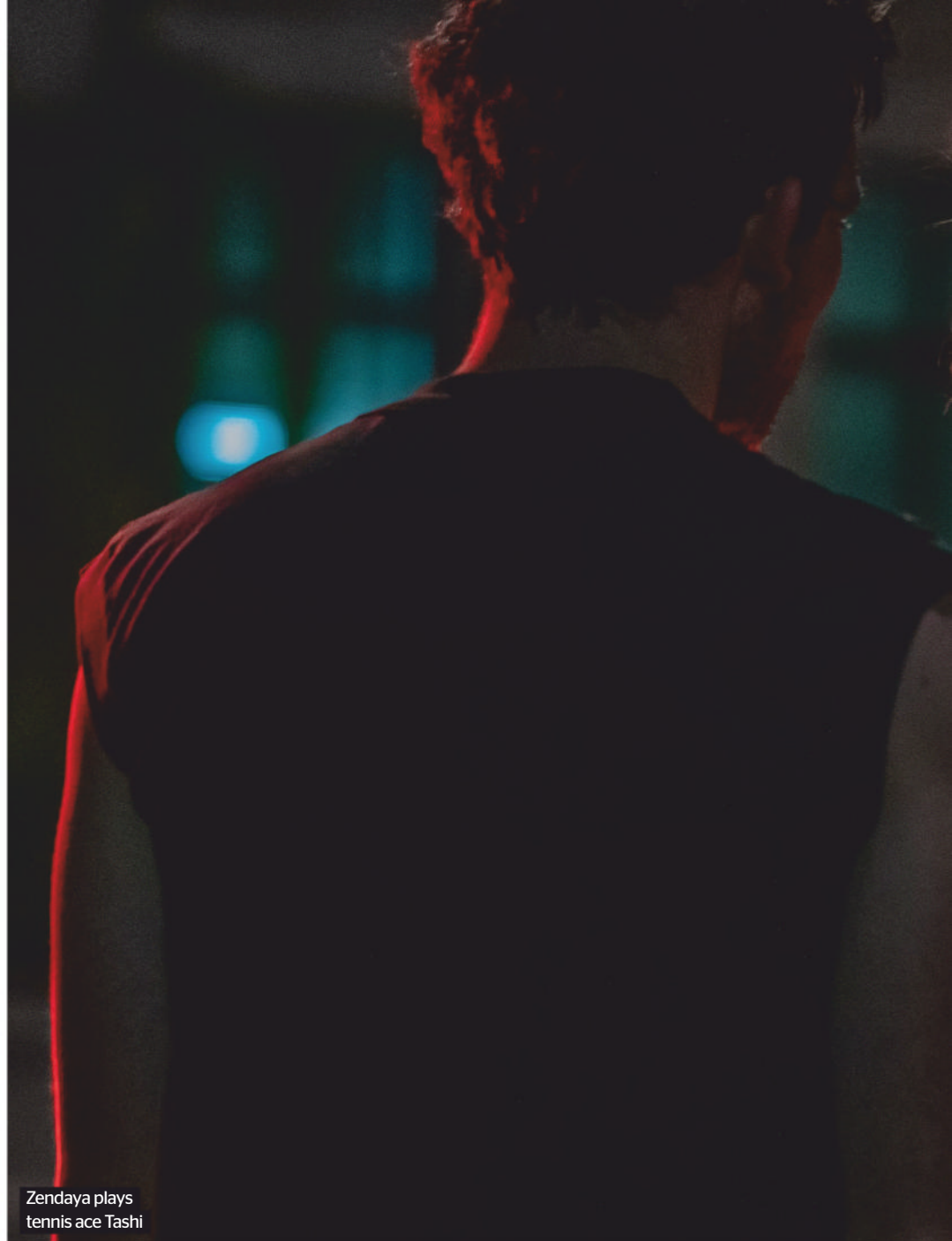
WORDS JANE CROWTHER

W

hen *Total Film* meets Zendaya and *The Crown*'s Josh O'Connor in London in June they are good-naturedly trash-talking their third wheel, Mike Faist, who can't make this chat due to his commitment to West End stage show *Brokeback Mountain*. 'Oh, you heard? Terrible!' Zendaya – or 'Zee' as her co-stars call her – jokes with a laugh before talking proudly of her absent colleague's performance as Jack Twist, which she, her boyfriend Tom Holland and O'Connor had seen the night before. Faist, when we meet a few days later between shows, keeps up the banter and teasing when he laughs about O'Connor's preparation (or lack thereof) for playing a champion tennis player.

The dynamic between the three is very much in keeping with the chemistry and vibe at the heart of Luca Guadagnino's follow-up to cannibal romance *Bones and All*, a switch in direction that he describes as 'a fairly fizzy, sexy movie about the world of tennis'. Written by playwright turned screenwriter Justin Kuritzkes, *Challengers* charts the relationship between best-friend players Patrick (O'Connor) and Art (Faist) as they meet tennis prodigy Tashi (Zendaya) in their training teens and interchange as her boyfriend/friend. Years later, when Art is a top seed in a crisis and Tashi now his wife and coach, the duo run into Patrick again, who's struggling to make ends meet but still has fire in his game – in every way. As Art and Patrick compete in a low-ranking challengers match (Art to flex, Patrick to win cash), old resentments and attractions come into play...

Zendaya produces as well as leads on the project – all the push-pull of the men's achievements, psychological warfare and heartbreak revolves around her queenly Tashi who witheringly comments that she is 'taking such good care of my little white boys' – and felt that the script spoke to her immediately after *Spider-Man* producer Amy Pascal brought it to her. 'It felt like the right fit,' she says, snuggling in her *Challengers*-logoed sweater ('from the wrap [party]'). 'Spider-Man was a big thing for us, and it's been hugely a part of my life. But it was very different in the sense that I was definitely just an actor in that, and in



Zendaya plays tennis ace Tashi

that world. I think her bringing this to me in the capacity of being collaborative was very exciting. It was special to start putting something together. The first person, and only person, that we really talked to was Luca, because I was so excited by the fact that he felt what I felt about what I had read, and wanted to have a conversation with me about it. I felt very honoured in that way. He'd already read it, and was like, "I know what kind of movie I want to make." And then when we talked about it, and those movies aligned – the movie I saw in my head, and the movie he saw in his head – and kind of connected in this crazy way, I just knew that this felt like the right fit.'

With Tashi on centre court, Zendaya and Guadagnino set about casting her 'little white boys' – Art, a perfectionist and pragmatist; Patrick, a firebrand and disrupter. Guadagnino legendarily does not believe in chemistry reads, preferring to match talent by intuition, and he and his star/producer landed on the same Brit playing a prince for their chaotic tennis brat. 'When I first read the script, I was shooting



Mike Faist and Josh O'Connor as tennis pros/best buddies Art and Patrick



WINNING THE SET

When the trailer for the film was released, it set the internet aflame with the palpable sexual ferocity between Zendaya and both co-stars, but also between the two men. Art and Patrick have a close friendship that dances around the edges of attraction, and that informs their battle on the courts and in Tashi's affections. That frisson, which can't be manufactured, was found in a pre-shoot rehearsal period in Boston in the spring of 2022, where the threesome honed their forehand and foreplay.

'We kind of went to summer camp,' Zendaya smiles. 'It was an acting/tennis summer camp. You wake up really early. Everybody's like, "OK, let's stretch together." We stretch, we play PE games...'

O'Connor interjects: 'Eat eggs, eat chicken and broccoli...'

'Broccoli! And work out, and play tennis, rehearse all day. It was a dream in that respect, you get paid to do what you would want to do anyway.'

'That's kind of what we do as actors,' Faist nods. 'You just kind of learn new skills with everything, and each time it just feels like, "OK, what kind of camp is this going to be?" And the three of us, really, we had a lot of fun training together and working together. It was definitely a memorable summer.'

'THE THREE OF US HAD A LOT OF FUN TRAINING TOGETHER AND WORKING TOGETHER'

ZENDAYA



Spider-Man: No Way Home and I watched *The Crown*,' Zendaya recalls. 'I was like, "Yo, this guy is amazing! Josh O'Connor. He would be perfect for this." Then when I talked to Luca, without having said anything, he was like, "So I'm thinking of Josh O'Connor." I was like, "OK! That was in my head, too!" And then his magical mind found Mike as well, and put this beautiful trio together. He really has an understanding of casting in a way that I think is really special.'

O'Connor agrees. 'He's told me he's not interested in the chemistry and stuff like that. But I think that's only because he has a very good understanding of what will work. I remember the first day of rehearsals, and I was sitting watching Zee and Mike doing a scene in this space, and it was just immediately apparent. I was like: "It's perfect casting." And the three of us, I think, were just perfect in that sense, and also very open actors. Zee and Mike were always offering stuff up, and always pushing each other, and me. We were all kind of helping ourselves along that way.'

'I love rehearsal space,' Zendaya enthuses of the process, 'because it's just a time to throw things out there, and see if anything sticks. So by the time you're on set, you feel free. You've had the conversations and the fear, and you're not losing time. You can just play.'

That play also included movie nights watching *Ratatouille* ('Some light-heartedness to balance some of the talk and the energy of these characters,' Zendaya chuckles) and time building the sexual power play and dynamics at work within the trio. 'Josh and I are just kind of, genuinely, these walking goofballs, who just like acting,' Faist smiles. 'I think Josh and I came out of this with a very similar mentality. And we just spent so much time together on this, all the time.' Two goofballs trying to woo a goddess could edge into bawdy comedy territory and though *Challengers* does offer humour, it delivers simmering sex scenes, as audiences might expect from Guadagnino's sensuous output.

'Look, it's a very vulnerable thing what we do, already, to begin with,' Faist shrugs of ensuring the physicality of the characters ➔

➡ felt as authentic as the tennis. ‘And then to add on these funny layers – you know, it can be so uncomfortable. So it was really important that we were all very honest and comfortable with each other, and made sure that we were creating a safe enough environment to be willing to play and do these things. It’s such a weird thing, because you have a whole crew of people standing over there, on the other side. There’s a camera pointing at you, and then they’re like, “OK, do this awkward thing.”

‘And you’re like, “OK, let’s do this awkward thing, and try to come across as believable.”

‘So you’re doing it, and all of a sudden, they say “cut”, and you give each other fist bumps or something. Something goofy to kind of break the tension of it all. I’m always like, “All right, who am I making out with today?”’

For Zendaya, the very real bond the trio built before cameras rolled is what makes the characters so believable for audiences. ‘Just being committed to the work, and holding space for each other, and being patient with each other, and just being really helpful, and just being in those rooms, and just talking shit through – I think it ultimately led to being in a space where we could just be like, “All right, let’s play.” I felt like I was, you know, filling the role of a leader, but also being led in many

ways by their performances, and how they show up to work every day.’

That process is a form of magic, says Faist – sometimes the talent put in a room together just gels and that gets captured on camera. ‘At the end of the day, you have a bunch of alchemists who are extremely passionate, who have no idea how to make the potion work. But for some reason, they’re just going to try...’

ADVANTAGE

Emotional dynamics sorted, the trifecta also had to nail looking like top seeds who knew their way around the professional tour. Having been on the project from that start, Zendaya trained with the film’s tennis consultant, former pro and Andre Agassi coach Brad Gilbert, and further refined her court style in the six-week rehearsal period. She became so convincing a grand slammer that Guadagnino gushed about her skills at the Academy Museum Gala in October 2022: ‘We edited the movie and we almost actually don’t use any of her double. She’s so good.’

O’Connor and Faist had less time, coming later to the project and directly off other sets. Their approaches mirrored their characters according to the actors. Faist, who admits his experience of tennis was playing one season in



Mike Faist achieves lift-off (above); director Luca Guadagnino on set



Three’s a crowd? Art, Tashi and Patrick get close

COURT JESTERS

Quiet, please, for these tennis tales...

WIMBLEDON (2004)

Paul Bettany and Kirsten Dunst rom-com up centre court in this Richard Curtis-alike with picture-postcard views of London. Features John McEnroe in a cameo and Jon Favreau as a slimy agent.

BREAK POINT (2014)

A washed-up pro doubles player (Jeremy Sisto) convinces his sad sack brother (David Walton) to be his partner in a shot at a grand slam. Features J.K. Simmons and a peppy 11-year-old called Barry.

BORG VS. McENROE (2017)

Focused on the match between the baseline player and the net rusher when Björn (Sverrir Gudnason) went up against John (Shia LaBeouf) in 1980. Features mullets and magnificent headbands.

BATTLE OF THE SEXES (2017)

True story of Billie Jean King (Emma Stone) and her fight for equal pay for female players via a stunt match opposite brash former world No.1, Bobby Riggs (Steve Carell). Features a tiny piglet and Carell lobbing shots with a frying pan.

KING RICHARD (2021)

The pa of the Williams' sisters gets a biopic, with Will Smith essaying the uncompromising dad-coach to Oscar-winning effect. Features short shorts and long, long socks.

FIFTEEN-LOVE (2023)

He-said/she-said Prime Video drama as a former tennis prodigy (Ella Lily Hyland) accuses her coach (Aidan Turner) of grooming to devastating effect for both of them. Features a wig that Turner should disown.

JANE CROWTHER



high school, was filming Jeff Nichols' *The Bikeriders* in Ohio immediately before arriving in Boston and was anxious about training enough to convince as a pro. 'Whenever I work, I just kind of obsess about things. I get tunnel vision; I'm a bit of a perfectionist. So when I found out that I got this I was very nervous about the whole thing because my character was probably a top-three tennis player in the world, and had been for some time.' Adding to his neurosis was Brad Gilbert's insistence Faist achieve a powerful one-handed backhand. 'I was in Ohio, and I got in touch with some professionals there through Brad, and, for six weeks, trained every day for about four hours.

'ZENDAYA WAS PRETTY FAST IN GETTING THE MOVES DOWN AND MIKE WAS UNBELIEVABLY GOOD'

JOSH O'CONNOR

When we got to Boston, I was so nervous, because I knew Zee had been training and I just assumed Josh had been, too. And when I get there Josh is holding the racquet, and questioning, "How do you hold this?" because he had been up on a hill in Italy shooting a movie for the past six weeks [*La Chimera*]. Once that happened, I kind of calmed my nerves, and thought, "This is going to be OK. I'm not, at least, Josh!"

O'Connor is Patrick-esque sanguine about his lack of tennis know-how, confessing he based his off-court mind games and meltdowns on Medvedev and Kyrgios. 'It was either acting or tennis for me...' he jokes. 'No, I'm rubbish, and I had never played any tennis. Zee was pretty fast in getting the moves down

and Mike, though we joke, was actually unbelievably good...'

'But you're supposed to have a certain style of play,' Zendaya assures. 'Like, there's technique, but then also it has to be a little fucked-up, too.'

O'Connor laughs. 'That worked in my favour because if anyone was like, "Hey, Josh, it's not like that" – I was like, "I know, but it's a character choice. That's how he holds it!"'

Playing such competitive sportspeople can't be too dissimilar to the rigours of acting, *Total Film* suggests, the commitment required to make that elusive top-seeded player spot and the rivalry in the audition room. 'It feels like what we do is more of a team sport,' Zendaya disagrees. 'You have so many departments and so many people creating this one thing. I don't ever look at it like, "I'm an actor, you're an actor. We're on separate sides of the thing." I try not to be in comparison or competition with anyone, except for Zendaya yesterday.'

For O'Connor, acting is too much of a multi-discipline, team-based profession to be as competitive as grand-slam rivals. 'It's kind of impossible to be competitive; it would be like a painter being in competition with a sculptor. What Zee offers as an actor is so completely different to what Mike offers, to what I offer. With tennis, there are small margins, and those players are all so good, and it's down to psychological competition.'

One place *Challengers* could be competing is in the 2025 awards season after the film's planned Venice Film Festival 2023 premiere was cancelled, delaying the release till 2024 due to the recent actors' strike. With this cast, though, it's bound to court attention whenever it lands. There's still all to play for...

CHALLENGERS IS AVAILABLE NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL.



THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR

SHE EXPLODED INTO THE ACTION MOVIE HALL OF FAME IN *FURY ROAD*. NOW, A PRE-IMPERATOR FURIOSA IS SEIZING THE WHEEL OF THE MAD MAX SAGA FOR A 16-YEAR ODYSSEY THROUGH THE WASTELAND. *TOTAL FILM* HITS THE ROAD WITH THE NEW, GREASE-PAINTED FACE OF STUDIO OZPLOITATION ANYA TAYLOR-JOY, CO-STAR CHRIS HEMSWORTH AND MAD GENIUS GEORGE MILLER FOR A GASOLINE AND RAGE-FUELLED PREQUEL ABOUT TO RIDE ETERNAL...

WORDS JORDAN FARLEY





Anya Taylor-Joy takes on the role of Furiosa, playing a younger version of Charlize Theron's *Fury Road* character

here are some films no one forgets watching for the first time: *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *Citizen Kane*. 2015's *Mad Max: Fury Road* is an inarguable addition to that list. A lunatic symphony conducted with euphoric precision, *Fury Road* didn't just raise the bar for vehicular carnage – it set the standard so high, even a careening Pole Cat couldn't hope to clear it. Speaking in 2017, Steven Soderbergh put the achievement of director George Miller and his creative team best: 'I don't understand how they're not still shooting that film and I don't understand how hundreds of people aren't dead.'

A similarly awestruck Chris Hemsworth can still recall the details of watching *Fury Road* for the first time. 'I remember, I was at the Electric Cinema on Portobello Road,' the action veteran tells *Total Film* over Zoom, smile widening. 'I'd been in the industry for a number of years at that point and it was becoming harder and harder to be surprised. I came out, called my agent, and said, "I have to work with George Miller in any way, shape, or form."'

Anya Taylor-Joy, the 28-year-old star with the unenviable task of stepping into Charlize Theron's skull-crusher boots as Furiosa, was filming the sci-fi horror film *Morgan* in Belfast when Miller's action opus

smashed into cinemas. 'As a cast bonding experience, we all went to see *Fury Road*,' says Taylor-Joy, in LA for Oscars weekend as we speak. 'I was riveted. And when it finished, I remember having the feeling of: "That is one of the best films I've ever seen."'

Two things are universally known about *Fury Road*: it kicks ass to an unprecedented level, and it was absolute hell to make. The road to reviving *Mad Max* – dormant for three decades following 1985's *Beyond Thunderdome* – was so long and arduous that during development Miller and co-writer Nick Lathouris didn't just write *Fury Road*, they dreamed up two further entries. A sequel, *The Wasteland*, would continue Max Rockatansky's peripatetic journey across the ecologically ravaged Earth, while a prequel, *Furiosa*, would recount the brutal backstory of *Fury Road*'s most important new addition.

'We had finished the script of *Furiosa* before we shot *Fury Road*,' Miller confirms over Zoom from Sydney, sitting in front of a phalanx of storyboards for the latest entry in his 45-year-old saga. That *Furiosa* emerged from the same creative maelstrom as *Fury Road* can only be a good thing. 'We already knew the backstories. We



One 15-minute sequence took 78 days to film



Chris Hemsworth joins the saga as the evil Dementus

had to, in order to tell *Fury Road*. What happened to Max the year before this? How come he found his way in the Wasteland? All that sort of thing. And how did Furiosa get there? Why did she become a Praetorian in service of Immortan Joe?

For a brief time, *Furiosa* was even developed as an anime spin-off – then called *The Peach* – which Mahiro Maeda (*Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Kill Bill Vol. 1*) was set to direct. ‘So *Furiosa* was ready, in a story sense, 15 years ago,’ says Doug Mitchell, Miller’s long-serving producing partner. ‘And it’s been percolating, the way things do in George’s brain, ever since.’

Despite the ecstatic reaction to *Fury Road*, work on *Furiosa* stalled, reportedly while Miller and studio Warner Bros settled a legal dispute. In the interim, Miller moved to make passion-project *Three Thousand Years of Longing*, but always kept one eye on *Furiosa*, evolving the script in response to the successes of *Fury Road*. ‘The hierarchy of the Wasteland with Immortan



‘IT WAS ONE OF THE BEST SCRIPT-READING EXPERIENCES I’VE HAD... FILLED WITH IMAGERY’
CHRIS HEMSWORTH

Joe, the Citadel, Gastown and Bullet Farm, which are all alluded to or seen in *Fury Road* – these were developed a bit more,’ Miller says.

Eventually, the script reached a gargantuan 250 pages, as opposed to a more traditional 120-page Hollywood script. But this was no ordinary screenplay. ‘It was one of the best script-reading experiences I’ve had because the script itself was filled with storyboards and imagery and long passages of information like you’d see in a novel,’ Hemsworth explains. ‘It was the most detailed document that I’d ever seen. I was like, “Why isn’t every script like this?” And I realised, “Well, George Miller didn’t write the others.”’

DRIVE TO SURVIVE

For all its intricately detailed world-building, compelling character dynamics, thematic complexity and thrilling lack of restraint, *Fury Road*’s story is as simple as they come – a pure A to B (and back to A) chase movie ➡➡



Lachy Hulme takes over the part of Immortan Joe

➤ set over two days and three nights. In contrast, Miller describes *Furiosa*'s story, which takes place over 16-odd years, as an 'odyssey' that puts its eponymous character on a crash course with rival warlords Dementus (Hemsworth) and Immortan Joe (Lachy Hulme, stepping in for Hugh Keays-Byrne, who died in 2020). 'We follow Furiosa from the age of 10 all the way through to her mid-to-late 20s. It runs straight into *Fury Road*, virtually. So that just naturally is a saga,' says Miller.

Though told largely on the move, amid outrageous automobile mayhem, much of *Furiosa*'s backstory is conveyed in *Fury Road*, including her abduction as a child from the Green Place. According to Taylor-Joy, that doesn't undercut the power of, ahem, witnessing it first-hand in *Furiosa*. 'I think you can hear about the horror, but seeing it is an entirely different thing,' she teases. 'I have a very different relationship to it – my characters feel like real people to me – but I cry immediately when I see the things that this girl was confronted with. It's pretty harrowing.'

Miller – who often compares his role as a filmmaker to that of a composer – notes that *Furiosa* possesses 'a different cadence and a different rhythm' to *Fury Road*; something Hemsworth was also struck by upon reading the script. 'There was a great sense of continuity to what had been done before. But what was exciting was, with a lot of the dialogue, there was a sort of Shakespearean tone to it,' he says. 'It's an epic tale. You see a real growth and change in the characters, or the demise in others. You see the environments they inhabit break down.' He pauses, and grins. 'But it has some insane action in it, as well.'

English actor Tom Burke, who plays War Rig driver Praetorian Jack, describes the film as a 'companion piece' to *Fury Road*, with 'a different tempo to the whole thing'. For better or worse, Miller has never rested on his laurels with the series, each largely standalone entry upending expectations of what a *Mad Max* movie can be. *Furiosa* might just be Miller's biggest swing yet – a structurally radical prequel with direct narrative connections to its predecessor that doesn't even feature the iconic character the series is named for. An even bigger swing: recasting *Furiosa*.



Tom Burke plays Praetorian Jack, pilot of the War Rig

NATURE OF THE BEAST

CHRIS HEMSWORTH ON HOW HE BUILT HIS STRANGEST CHARACTER YET.

'I got offered the part [of Dementus] three years before we started shooting. I had all this energy, and this creative discussion was pouring out of me, but I didn't have an initial, strong opinion on who the character was. The months would go by. A year would go by. On year two, I'd go, "It'll come to me." I'd keep reading, and keep discussing things with George. I got about two weeks out, and thought, "Shit, now I'm starting to worry."

'George suggested to me to journal as the character, which I hadn't done before. It was 2am one night. I was awake, and I just put pen to paper, and just started

scribbling down thoughts and ideas as Dementus. I didn't think much of it. I went to sleep, and woke up, and was quite shocked at what came out of me in that half-asleep state. I went into rehearsal, and showed George, and we both went, "That's it. That's the direction we've got to go."

'A lot of it was about his trauma, and the tragedies in the Wasteland that led him to become the individual that he was. It gave me a better sense of empathy for this villainous, pretty ugly personality. I started to see a way in, and a "why" to his actions.

'It's not to excuse any of the horrific shit he does in the film, but to empathise with him, in a strange way, and develop a greater understanding of who he was.' **JF**





Miller was sold on Anya Taylor-Joy after seeing her work in *Last Night in Soho*

TAYLOR MADE

Talking of iconic characters, few would dispute that Furiosa deserves the same label. Played with ferocious tenacity, intimidating physicality and heartbreaking vulnerability by Charlize Theron, Furiosa shined so bright that she eclipsed Max in his own movie. 'I fell in love with Furiosa through Charlize's interpretation,' Taylor-Joy smiles. 'Her performance left an indelible mark on me. [Charlize has] been so classy, and kind, and generous with me. I just feel very lucky.'

The idea of digitally de-aging Theron was explored but quickly dismissed. 'Even in the hands of really masterful filmmakers like Martin Scorsese and Ang Lee, it just wasn't working,' Miller notes. It wasn't until a pre-pandemic peek at *Last Night in Soho*, and Edgar Wright's subsequent endorsement of Taylor-Joy, that Miller considered Taylor-Joy for his Furiosa prequel. 'When I think about it, I'm like, "What about me swanning down a bunch of steps, and singing *Downtown* was like, "Yes, that's my Furiosa?"' Taylor-Joy says with a chuckle. 'I think I recognised in Anya that she has the same resolute quality that Charlize has as an actor and as a person,' explains Miller, who was also drawn to the fact that Taylor-Joy, like Theron, trained in ballet. 'They're both very physically precise and adept, as they are emotionally precise. There was a certain overlap between the two of them.'

Describing an 'extreme protectiveness' over Furiosa as a fan, Taylor-Joy nevertheless considered her responsibility, 'first and foremost', to the script and its depiction of a nascent Furiosa still being forged in a crucible of fire and blood. 'It was a really big conversation



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GEORGE MILLER

that George and I had,' Taylor-Joy says. 'The Furiosa you meet in *Fury Road*, she's the lead driver of the War Rig, so she's had access to a lot of resources, to protein, to this, to that. I didn't want her to look like a superhero, because that is the beauty of these films: they're not superhero movies; they're what happens to the human mind and body when you are pushed to that kind of extreme.'

Subject to four-and-a-half-hour sessions in the make-up chair to become the full, bionic-armed Emperor, Taylor-Joy claims the decision to don a bald cap in the film, rather than a real buzzcut, was at the request of her director. 'I was so ready to shave my head,' Taylor-Joy exclaims. 'I was really excited to do it! Then George, in his absolute gentleness, saw me, and touched my hair, and went, "No." [laughs].' Taylor-Joy also surprised Miller with the lengths she was willing to go to in other ways. 'I will say, my background in horror, and my deep love for the extreme, did actually result in, a few times, out-crazy-ing George. I felt very proud of those moments where he's like, "That's quite depraved, Anya!"'

THE WILD ONE

Depravity and insanity are par for the course in the world of *Furiosa*, and Dementus might be the most deranged denizen of the Wasteland to date. 'I certainly understood the beautiful madness that I was going to be a part of,' says Hemsworth, who makes a rare departure from (super)heroics to play a true rotter. The leader of the biker horde, Dementus is 'a variation of a theme that we've seen over and over again, right through our history – a tyrannical figure who has the charisma to bring people along with him,' explains Miller.



As with *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the majority of the effects in *Furiosa* are practical, not CGI

➤ ‘We discussed a lot of historic dictators that expressed power and dominance through violence and fear,’ adds Hemsworth, who developed the character with Miller over the course of three years (see boxout, p52). ‘He gave people’s fear a face and presented himself as the one person that was going to free them from their current suffering.’ Dementus’ caricatured appearance and way of speaking also evolved from this historical grounding. ‘There is a familiar attempt to be larger than life and all-knowing. Even the profile of Dementus, with the prosthetic nose – there was something historic about that shape.’

According to Hemsworth, that prosthetic schnozz was Miller’s idea, but one he embraced wholeheartedly. ‘I got pretty excited, and went right into it looking like a hobbit. I was like, “Bigger! More! Larger!” I was turning myself into a Halloween costume, and George was like, “It’s got to be grounded in some truth.” So he pulled me back a bit!’ Like Taylor-Joy, Hemsworth spent ‘three to four hours’ in make-up every morning, having both a prosthetic nose and a coarse yak-hair beard painstakingly applied. ‘It was a torturous process,’ he admits. ‘I started at about 3am. So by the time I got to set, I had an appropriate amount of frustration and irritation that then echoed through my performance.’

Responsible for abducting Furiosa from the Vuvalini and murdering her mother, Dementus perversely sees himself as a ‘paternal’ figure to Furiosa who ‘protected her from the dangers of this life, and prepared her for the violent world that she is about to grow up in’, according to Hemsworth. Taylor-Joy sees their dynamic somewhat differently. ‘My inner Furiosa wants to rip Chris’ face off!’ she says with a laugh. ‘For her, he becomes a very easy arrow point of all of the hurt that she has experienced in her life. George spoke often about creating a worthy opponent for Furiosa, and the film is gearing up towards

a fever pitch of when these two people are going to make contact.’

Though not Furiosa’s main antagonist – yet, anyway – Immortan Joe is a major roadblock for Dementus. ‘[Coming face to face with Immortan Joe] was probably the biggest “pinch myself” moment I’ve ever had,’ Hemsworth beams. ‘That outfit, the wig – that image is so iconic. I don’t think we’ve ever seen Immortan being manipulated like we see in this.’ For Taylor-Joy, the parallels between Immortan Joe, who Furiosa serves

Chris Hemsworth now keeps the three-bike chariot at his home



as a means for vengeance, and Dementus are clear. 'When I zoom out of her story, I see it as this woman with impossible hope, attempting to make her own course in life. And the course she's having to take is absolutely destroyed by these two men.'

DESERT STORM

Destruction is the apposite word in the world of Mad Max. Celebrated by audiences and revered by filmmakers, *Fury Road*'s largely practical action set-pieces remain an unparalleled movie-making wonder, which is why Miller getting the band back together (literally, if you include the returning Doof Warrior) behind the scenes of *Furiosa* – including Second Unit Director Guy Norris, editor Margaret Sixel and visual effects supervisor Colin Gibson – is a gleefully tantalising prospect.

The film was shot predominantly at Broken Hill (where Miller filmed *Mad Max 2* in 1981 and was due to shoot *Fury Road* before unprecedented rainfall forced a move to Namibia) and the sand dunes of Sydney; over 1,000 people worked across *Furiosa*'s two main units, which shot for 109 and 130 days each, all under Miller's watchful eye. 'Now, that's like nothing anybody really does,' says Mitchell, who adds that a 'backup' team of editors created a near-instant 'assembly edit' of the film as they were shooting, so Miller was constantly aware of what he did and didn't have.

All the innovative 'tools' that Miller and Sixel developed on *Fury Road* – shooting and cutting with 'flow' in mind, placing the focal point of the action in the centre of the frame during fast-paced sequences – were applied to *Furiosa*. Miller describes his filmmaking style as a 'mosaic art'. This process of short takes – some seconds long, capturing precisely what he needs and nothing more – flummoxed Theron and, particularly, Tom Hardy on *Fury Road*, causing the latter to 'panic' and bringing out 'erratic behaviours' that, says Miller, contributed to that film's chaotic production. But the cast of *Furiosa* had the benefit of knowing that such a process can result in, well, *Fury Road*.

'These movies are big, colossal beasts, and it's a type of filmmaking where it's all stitched together so surgically



'Take me hooooome,
Fury Road...'

Hemsworth and Miller spent time discussing historic dictators to inform Dementus



**'HE GAVE
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A FACE AND
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THAT WAS
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FREE THEM'**
CHRIS HEMSWORTH

that you can feel a bit lost in it,' admits Taylor-Joy, who was given two words of advice by Nux actor Nicholas Hoult while they filmed *The Menu* together: trust George. 'I would watch the first 10 minutes of *Fury Road* over and over again, just to understand how all of it worked.'

As for the all-important set-pieces, while no one is claiming the film will out-muscle *Fury Road* (what possibly could?), Mitchell points out that *Furiosa* 'has one 15-minute sequence which took us 78 days to shoot', with close to 200 stunt people working on it daily. Known during production as 'Stowaway to Nowhere', the sequence marks a turning point for *Furiosa*. 'George and I would have these big conversations about why this particular set-piece was so long,' says Taylor-Joy, who still doesn't have a driver's licence, despite learning to do a J-turn on her first day of stunt school. 'It's because you see an accumulation of skills over the course of a battle, and that's very important for understanding how resourceful Furiosa is, but also her grit. It's the longest sequence any of us have ever shot. On the day we finished, everybody got a "Stowaway To Nowhere" wine!'

While Taylor-Joy spent weeks clambering over, under and around a War Rig, Burke as the Rig's go-to pilot Praetorian Jack had a comfortable view of the mayhem from behind the wheel. 'There's so much going on; that's what was so thrilling about it,' he says. 'You could see ➡



'Jump in! We're getting the band back together'

➤ stunts happening ahead of you, in one's periphery. It's exactly as you might imagine watching it: everything is happening in widescreen.'

For Hemsworth, the experience of riding atop the suitably OTT vehicles was even more overwhelming. 'I felt incredibly small propped up on top of the Monster Truck, just hanging on as someone's doing big donuts in the sand – that was a lot of fun!' he says. As for the three-bike chariot, Hemsworth describes it as 'uncomfortable, loud, not really very practical... but it looks cool as hell!' He even notes: 'It's actually in my house at the moment. It's next to a couple of Mjolnirs and Stormbreakers...'

Both vehicles were built for real, naturally, and despite concerns about the amount of CGI in *Furiosa's* trailers, Miller claims he's using VFX no more liberally here than he did on *Fury Road*, and primarily for practical and safety considerations. 'You need something in the frame to be real, and preferably the thing the majority of eyes will be scanning, when the shot appears,' he explains. 'The visual effects supervisor, Andrew Jackson, is somebody who started off with real effects and props, and has carried it into his work. And it fits very well with how I believe things should be done, and how the Mad Max world requires that to be the case.'

MASTER OF CEREMONIES

Speaking to Miller is something of a surreal experience. Despite being the maestro behind several of the most crazed movies of the past 45 years (including *Babe: Pig in the City*), he's an unfailingly avuncular presence, on and off set. 'How does this chaotic space come from his imagination?' Hemsworth wonders to this day. 'I think it's why it works. You could be doing something so violent and dangerous and chaotic, but you can surrender to it, because he is the eyes and ears to all of it.'

Taylor-Joy echoes that, adding: 'George, more than any other director that I've worked with, really paints his scenes. You can do eight takes of something on second unit, and then you'll get a call in from George, who's seen it, and he's like, "Anya's helmet has to be one centimetre further up on her head." And it's like, "Right, bin those. Go again." Because he's very precise about exactly what it is he wants to see.'



Objects in the rear-view mirror may be closer than they appear

MAD WORLD

77 DARES TO LOOK AT THE MOST BONKERS BADDIES TO TAKE ON MAX...

TOECUTTER (MAD MAX)

The leader of the Acolytes Motorcycle Gang that terrorises the outback, Toecutter (RSC actor Hugh Keays-Byrne) mows down Max's wife and son. Ruthless, greedy and sarcastic, he's also educated and strategic, and even shows evidence of a conscience when he's not raping, killing, or harming animals.



LORD HUMUNGUS (MAD MAX 2)

Wearing a hockey mask a year before Jason Voorhees found his look, Lord Humungus (Kjell Nilsson) rides a modified Ford F-100 and wields a Trident Spear while leading the psychotic Marauders in their pursuit of oil. He is, naturally, on a collision course with Max – literally, in the explosive climax.



MASTER BLASTER

(MAD MAX BEYOND THUNDERDOME)

When it comes to the apocalypse, together is stronger. So Master (Angelo Rossitto, 2ft 11in) is the brains and the masked Blaster (Paul Larsson, a 6ft 8in plumber from Sydney) is the brawn – and between them they rule Bartertown. George Miller first had the idea when he considered a sparrow sitting on a rhino's back.



RICTUS ERECTUS

(MAD MAX: FURY ROAD)

The (morning) glory of the name suits the man – an angry, bulging, vein-popping colossus with a bald head, played by 6ft 11" strongman champ Nathan Jones. Rictus Erectus is the youngest son of Immortan Joe, and joins the war party in pursuit of Imperator Furiosa and Max. His death, as you'd expect, is... explosive. **JG**



Filming returned to Australia for this movie, including Sydney's sand dunes



Miller asked Taylor-Joy not to cut her hair – instead, she wore a bald cap for her later scenes



'GEORGE, MORE THAN ANY OTHER DIRECTOR THAT I'VE WORKED WITH, REALLY PAINTS HIS SCENES... HE'S VERY PRECISE'

ANYA TAYLOR-JOY

Miller's control over the frame even extends to the screening process, with the film only shown to cast and crew in black and white (or should that be black and chrome?) until work is complete. 'He doesn't show you the film in colour until the premiere, basically, because he doesn't want you to look at all the unfinished VFX shots and be distracted by that,' Hemsworth explains. 'He just wants a pure reaction to the story, which I think is quite beneficial.'

Due to a combination of the actors' strike and his previously announced time off from acting, Hemsworth hasn't shot anything since filming wrapped on *Furiosa* way back in October 2022. 'And as I search for what I'm going to do next, the bar has been raised so high that I don't know if I'm ever going to have an experience like it again, unfortunately,' he says with candour. 'To have a script that is so incredible you want to do it justice, and every ounce of your being is committed to making it work – I don't know that I'll ever top it.'

'I feel such a kinship to anybody who has made a film like this, because it's the definition of: unless you've experienced it, you just don't know what it's like,' adds Taylor-Joy. 'You can prepare, but it's like being melded in fire. It gave me such an incredible sense of satisfaction. I think we're all addicted to a bit of chaos, and a bit of the impossible now.' One thing's for sure: no one will forget *Furiosa* in a hurry.

FURIOSA: A MAD MAX SAGA IS AVAILABLE NOW ON 4K, BLU-RAY, DVD AND DIGITAL.





ACT of CREATION

WHILE TEAMING UP ON *THE FAVOURITE*, STAR EMMA STONE AND DIRECTOR *YORGOS LANTHIMOS* FORGED AN ELECTRIC CREATIVE PARTNERSHIP THAT SHOWS NO SIGNS OF SLOWING DOWN. WITH ECCENTRIC FEMINIST *FRANKENSTEIN* FABLE *POOR THINGS* UP NEXT, THE DUO TALK TO *TOTAL FILM* ABOUT THEIR 'ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME CONNECTION'.

WORDS MATT MAYTUM



Yorgos Lanthimos might be a world-renowned director but his blocking and cinematography could use a little work. Well, when it comes to video conference calls, that is. It's June 2023 and *Total Film* is logged into a three-way chat with Lanthimos and Emma Stone. Stone's barely begun her first answer when her attention is pulled elsewhere. 'Oh no, is it doing the tracking? Did you not turn that off?' she asks, as Lanthimos shifts in his seat and the webcam automatically pans and zooms to follow him.

'I haven't figured out how to turn that off,' he smirks, much to Stone's amusement.

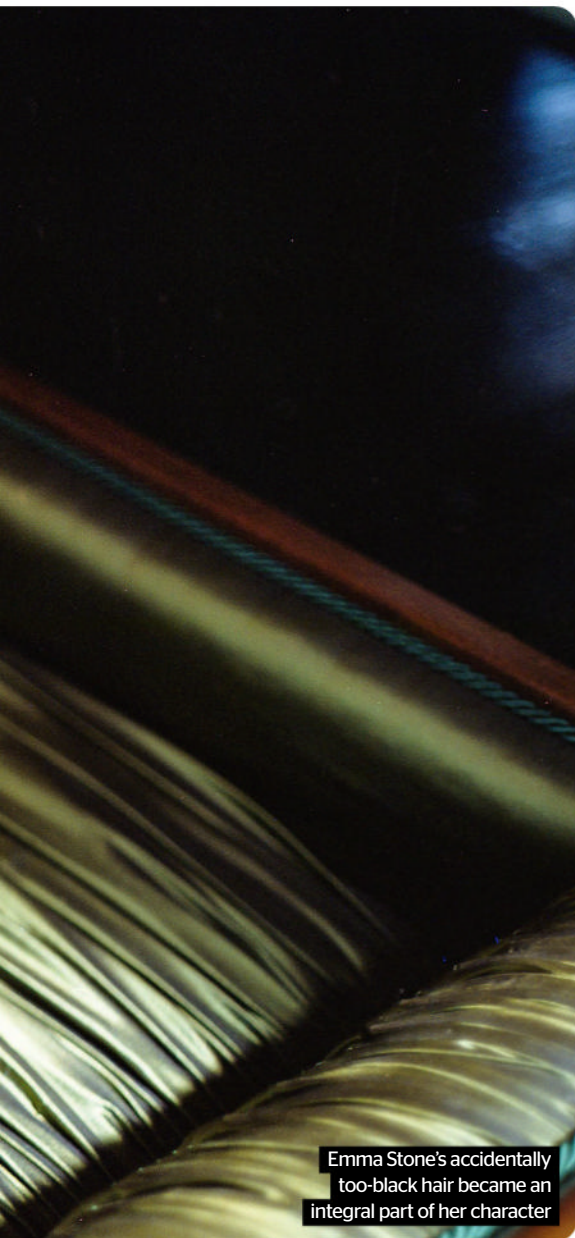
The out-of-control webcam seems all the more incongruous trained on a director known for having such a distinct vision, and rigorous control of the frame in the likes of *Dogtooth*, *The Lobster*, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*. We've all dialled in today – Lanthimos from Greece, Stone from New York City, *TF* from London – to discuss their fruitful creative partnership, which began with 2018's *The Favourite* and has snowballed since to three films (with a fourth now shooting).

Though before we can dig too deeply into their partnership, that camera's causing more chaos. 'God, almighty,' cackles Stone, distracted again. 'Stand up. See what happens.' Lanthimos obliges and the camera follows him up. 'We should do an entire film with that,' suggests Stone, dressed in a casual black shirt, blonde hair tucked behind her ears. 'No one has to operate and you are always followed.'

After *The Favourite* – for which Lanthimos, Stone and the film were all Oscar-nominated – they reteamed for a short film, *Bleat*, and then upcoming period sci-fi-drama-comedy-odddity *Poor Things*. Just months after release, *Kinds of Kindness* debuted at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival. Their next film – a remake of 2003's *Save The Green Planet* called *Bugonia* – is currently in production.

Adapted from the 1992 novel by Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things* is a sorta Frankenstein story in which Bella (Emma Stone) is brought back to life by a most unusual method by scientist Dr. Godwin Baxter (Willem Dafoe) – 'God' for short. Initially very childlike in her outlook, Bella develops at an accelerated rate, heading off on hedonistic travels with a rakish lawyer (Mark Ruffalo) and gorging on all the world has to offer, with zero regard for societal





Emma Stone's accidentally too-black hair became an integral part of her character

'THIS FEELS LIKE ANOTHER LEVEL OF VULNERABILITY AND LOVE AND CARE' EMMA STONE

conventions. It promises to be an otherworldly visual treat with potent philosophical ramifications, presented via Lanthimos' skewed perspective on the world and his gift for twisted language.

Stone is also a producer on *Poor Things*, and has been discussing the film with Lanthimos since before the pandemic struck. 'It's definitely more of a raw nerve than anything I have ever been a part of,' says Stone. 'I've cared about films deeply, but this feels like another level of vulnerability and love and care. It feels very precious to me.'

After earning Stone her second Oscar for Best Actress, it certainly won't be the last time that she and Lanthimos collaborate. 'It wasn't necessarily obvious, the guy from Greece meeting this American actress,' laughs Lanthimos. 'It's one of these things where it's a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. You meet someone you just want to make things with.'



Were you particularly familiar with each other's work before collaborating on *The Favourite*?

Yorgos Lanthimos: I think that's a more interesting question for you. I had watched *Easy A*, for sure. [laughs]

Emma Stone: You had watched *Easy A*? You had not.

YL: Of course! What do you mean?

ES: It was a huge hit in Athens?

YL: It was. Everywhere. Around the world.

ES: I hadn't actually seen any of Yorgos's films – it's not surprising, with my limited cinematic scope – before I had heard about *The Favourite*. He had just been in Cannes with *The Lobster*, I think, and I met you the month after. They set up a screening of *The Lobster* for me – I don't think he was really thinking of me that much for *The Favourite*, right? I kind of had to fight.

YL: No, that's not true.

ES: OK [laughs]. And then I watched *Dogtooth*.... Now I've seen all his films multiple times. I had a quick introduction to the world of Yorgos. And he had seen *Easy A* at least five or six times by that point [laughs].

Did the two of you hit it off right away when you met for *The Favourite*?

ES: I think so.

YL: Yeah, I think since we met. It took a while until we ended up filming *The Favourite*. It was a couple of years later. In the meantime, we kept in touch and got to know each other a little bit. And we got to know each other very well during *The Favourite*, of course. We started

becoming close, and started discussing other things we wanted to do together. It's been progressing ever since.

What was it about each other that you connected with, and liked working with?

ES: I loved the worlds that he had created. In seeing his films, I found his perspective really interesting, and nothing I had ever seen before. I mean, now that I've seen more films – because, you know, I'm really catching up – I understand that there are other filmmakers that also have interesting worlds that they've created [laughs].

YL: I just caught her off-guard. She hadn't seen anything...

ES: You just caught me off-guard, because I had only watched *Legally Blonde* 15 times [laughs]. I think, originally, I was nervous to meet him after seeing *Dogtooth*, because I was like, 'This man is going to be a sick fuck.' And then I met him, and he was so warm and personable and funny, and so easy to get along with. That is exactly my dream dichotomy, because I like to have fun, and I like to screw around, and not take things too seriously.

I think he's more serious than I am. Or I'm more anxious than you [laughs]. He doesn't over-explain. He doesn't want to talk too much about all of it. And I love that. I guess that was the draw for me.

And every project that we've talked about or worked on has felt completely different to the last. And yet I have such an immense amount of respect and trust in him, that I know it will work. And that's a huge relief for an actor. So that's it for me. What's your answer?

YL: [laughs] So, yeah, I had seen a lot of her work. For me, a lot of the time, a lot of it is instinct, and just being interested in someone, and then getting to know them. It's very important for me to get along, and be in it for the same reasons. I think that's one of the reasons why we're kind of creating a little group of actors, now that we've started working together more and more.



Lanthimos and Stone, working through a scene on their latest collaboration; pictured on set of *The Favourite*, above

➡ Emma was one of these people where we met, we got along and then when we made *The Favourite*. It was great. The conversation hasn't stopped since then. Every time we finish something, it's like, 'So what do we want to do next?' It's that kind of very close collaboration.

Emma, what was it about *Poor Things* that sparked your imagination when Yorgos first shared his interest with you?

ES: I mean, everything about it. The fact that it was him telling me about it was the first cognitive thing. The way he explained the story to me, the character, and what she's going through... Her open-mindedness, and her lack of judgement, and her lack of shame about herself and about others – it was really inspiring, just from the beginning. And that's only grown.

What was your collaboration like when settling on the look of Bella?

YL: As we were researching the film early on – even from production design, we had ideas and images for her. In order to imagine the world, and build it, and design it, you had to have an idea for what she was like and what the other characters were like. So it started very early on, but it evolved, because then there's the input of everyone, from Emma to hair and make-up, costume, the script, our ideas. I think it's a complex journey into getting her where she was. What's your memory?

ES: Well, I remember I dyed my hair too dark and we had to kind of go with that [laughs].

YL: That was an idea, that she'd be almost ahead of her time – a reactionary of sorts. But childlike and natural, and all these things. So we felt like, 'It'd be a great idea to dye her hair dark.' But then Emma went ahead and became jet black. And I was like, 'Alright.' [laughs]

ES: It just kept going and going and it was like, 'Goddamn it. Alright.' [laughs] Black.

YL: It looked stunning with her very white

skin. There's all these accidents, to the very detailed design of certain costumes, and then, I don't know, they break apart, and then we build something else. So it's a very complex process, I think.

It's a very feminist film. Was that at the forefront of your discussions?

YL: I don't think we discussed it. It was kind of obvious it was there. It wasn't like, 'Let's go and make a feminist film.' Also, I'm reluctant to say that I made a feminist film. It's what it is. It's my viewpoint, so it's male, and [Tony McNamara, screenwriter] is male, and the original [author] is male. And then we have Emma's input, and then it becomes a more complex view on this subject, and this world. For us, it's more instinctive, and it's the ideas

'SEX OR ANY OTHER HUMAN ACTIVITY IS NOT PARTICULARLY HARD TO GRASP IN FILM'
YORGOS LANTHIMOS

and the situation and the story that are of interest to us... We want to keep that open, and not narrow it down to one specific idea.

ES: Also, the fact that it was written by a man, it almost felt like a sort of dissection of different types of men – a sort of self-examination. There's all these different versions of archetypal men in the film. But instead of writing a sort of – for lack of a better word – manic pixie dream character in Bella, her world does not revolve around these men. These men, in some ways, sort of revolve around her, because they can't believe that she'd exist in this way, and her thirst is for experience, and for knowledge, and to grow.

In terms of a character being written by a man – or a feminist story – I think Bella could have been a male character, probably. I'm glad that she was a female character, but she's so specific and unique in all ways. I don't even

Stone sees this as the next step on her filmmaking journey with Lanthimos

know that her gender really does come into it for me, because she doesn't ascribe herself to what it is to be a woman in the 1800s in England, or travelling. She lives completely by her own terms. Which I guess is feminism, right? That's how it should be. To be able to be completely as we are, without societal boxes.

Sex is integral to the character and story.

The film asks a lot in terms of sex scenes and nudity. How did you both approach that side of the production?

YL: For me, personally, sex or any other human activity is not particularly hard to grasp in film or storytelling or in any way. For me, it wasn't such a standout issue. But having worked with people, I understand that there is a kind of intimidation and it's because we are real people. We are exposed in a certain way. So I understand that aspect of it.

But my idea was, it needs to be presented the same way as anything else is presented. We just need to be, you know, truthful about it, and not shy away from it, especially in this story, where a lot of it is about that: her freedom to express herself through every kind of way.

ES: And my relationship to it was what he's



Bella Baxter's pure physicality is something Stone purposely brought to the role



and Hayley [Williams], our first AD, is a woman, and is the sweetest person you'll ever meet, and Olga [Abramson], our focus puller. These are the only people that were in the room with me for these nude scenes. Or I was with Mark [Ruffalo], who's like a love bug. So I felt really comfortable, and I was like, 'I think I'll be fine. I think I'll be alright. I won't need to talk to the intimacy coordinator that much.'

I couldn't have been more wrong. She was so integral to feeling comfortable. She was so gentle and passionate. She was just amazing and so helpful in that whole process. It really made me understand intimacy coordinators when they're really good at what they do. It changed the entire energy of the set, and the feeling of safety. She was an incredible part, also, of those scenes.

What can you say about *Kinds of Kindness*, now that shooting is completed on the film?

YL: Well, what can we tease? It's three different stories and you see one after the other. There's a troupe of actors that basically play different roles in the different stories. So each actor plays three different roles in this film. It's a contemporary story – or contemporary stories, because it's three. That's about it. We've started editing. We're still putting the finishing touches onto *Poor Things*, so the editing of *Kinds of Kindness* has been delayed, but now we're really getting into it and discovering what it really is. Because you never really know with a film, until you're done, what it wants to be.

How did making *Kinds of Kindness* compare for you, Emma, to the previous films with Yorgos? Or was it much the same?

ES: It felt the same, in many ways. I mean, it was difficult in its own way to do three different characters – for all of us, to do three different characters for three different stories.

YL: In a short period, as well.

ES: Yeah, it was about three weeks. So it felt like making three kind of short films, back to back. But no, it was great.

YL: It basically felt like doing three feature films back to back.

ES: It did. They're long. They're going to work on that. But just getting to work together again and again, it really does change a lot when you've worked with this person, or these people, multiple times, because the shorthand and the ease of it is so there, that you feel like you can enter all these different worlds and it actually doesn't feel that different. It feels like a safe space to fuck up, and to play around and to explore things, and then to also be able to have a drink together at the end of the day and feel close with them. Like you said, it's once-in-a-lifetime. It's incredibly rare. I hope they'll let us keep doing things.

POOR THINGS IS OUT NOW ON BLU-RAY, DVD AND DIGITAL.

describing. Bella is not ashamed. She doesn't know to be ashamed of a naked body or sex, in the same way she shoves a ton of tarts into her mouth, or gets drunk and falls asleep, and has all of these experiences. She wants the most out of life. And sex, for her, is a part of that.

YL: Or dancing.

ES: Or dancing. There's so many different facets of her that she wants to experience the most of, and then she starts to understand that if it's too much of a good thing, it's not necessarily as enticing any more. So she learns that as she goes on.

But when it came to the nudity, Bella doesn't shy away from that, and if the camera were to, then the viewpoint, I think, is then...

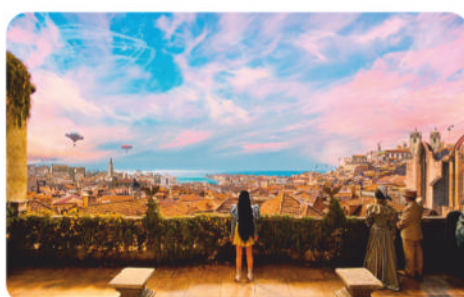
well, she's free, but we aren't, when we're watching her, because of our society.

Also, I think, Yorgos does nudity relatively well, in the sense that, to me, as someone who has lived a very prudish life for most of my life, I don't find the nudity in his films gratuitous. I find it slightly clinical, sometimes off-putting and usually very funny. So it doesn't feel like these leering shots that are like, 'Ooh, look at this body.' It's usually within the context of something that is a bit more dry or clinical or funny. So that felt right to me.

I also have to bring up Elle McAlpine, because she was amazing. Our intimacy coordinator. I felt comfortable with Yorgos. I felt comfortable with Robbie [Ryan], our DP,



Stone with Mark Ruffalo in *Poor Things*



SEARCHLIGHT, YORGOS LANTIMOS, ATSUSHI NISHIJIMA

THE SUPER-

DEADPOOL IS BACK AND HE'S NOW A BONA FIDE MEMBER OF THE MCU WITH WOLVERINE ALONG FOR THE RIDE. **TOTAL FILM** SPEAKS TO FRIENDS FROM WORK RYAN REYNOLDS, HUGH JACKMAN AND DIRECTOR SHAWN LEVY ABOUT JOINING THE BIG LEAGUES, RESURRECTING WOLVERINE, AND HOW DEADPOOL MAY BE MARVEL'S MESSIAH BUT HE'S STILL A VERY NAUGHTY BOY...

WORDS LEILA LATIF



LODD COUPLE

Hugh Jackman is back as Wolverine, almost 25 years after he first played the role



Matthew Macfadyen joins the cast as TVA agent Paradox



Wade Wilson goes by many names: Deadpool, The Merc with a Mouth, The Regenerating Degenerate and now... Marvel Jesus. Not only is he the self-proclaimed messiah and saviour of the MCU, but he has also performed his own miracle – the resurrection of Hugh Jackman's Wolverine.

Deadpool & Wolverine director Shawn Levy admits that – post strikes and alongside a widely reported epidemic of superhero fatigue meaning it's the only comic-book film of the summer – positioning Deadpool as the potential saviour of the MCU has particular resonance. 'I would love to take credit for those parallels,' Levy tells *Total Film*. 'Some we absolutely intend, but some are coincidences, and we came up with "Marvel Jesus" two years ago.' But Levy isn't concerned that people won't show up for future MCU instalments: 'People love to get on bandwagons whether they're positive, but frankly even more when they're negative.'

Six years after *Deadpool 2*, we are reacquainted with our crimson-suited hero. He's proving to be useless at selling cars, hawking Blind Al's (Leslie Uggams) blood-pressure meds to make rent, and his beloved Vanessa (Morena Baccarin) has a new boyfriend. But despite insisting to his pal Peter (Rob Delaney) that he's over the whole superhero thing, when the Time Variance Authority come a-knockin', after just a few minutes with Matthew Macfadyen's TVA agent Paradox explaining how he is needed to protect the Sacred Timeline,

'DEADPOOL IS GETTING A PROMOTION HE NEVER IMAGINED... IT IS VERY PARALLEL TO RYAN REYNOLDS BEING WELCOMED INTO THIS FRANCHISE'

SHAWN LEVY

Deadpool can't resist stepping up to the plate with a joyful, 'Suck it, Fox, I'm going to Disneyland!'

As Levy explains, the metatextual layers of the action comedy extend beyond the fourth-wall-breaking jokes Deadpool is known for. Following the acquisition of 20th Century Fox (which made the previous 'Pool films) by Disney in 2017, this film candidly celebrates Deadpool's first official outing as a member of the MCU. 'Deadpool is getting a promotion he never imagined would happen,' Levy says. 'It is parallel to Ryan Reynolds being welcomed into this lofty superhero franchise. But we had no idea it would be this unique moment where people are asking what the MCU means any more. Can it surprise us? Can it break moulds in ways that we don't expect? We certainly hope that this movie is an answer to those questions.'

Obvious spoiler alert: Wolverine is along for the ride, too, with this iteration featuring the classic yellow suit Jackman never wore in the X-movie timeline. He's not the only new addition, with actor Emma Corrin playing Cassandra Nova, a telekinetic villain with an intriguing history in the comics. And there's been much speculation about other familiar faces, even if the specifics remain closely guarded secrets. Of course, canine variant Dogpool will also debut (and possibly steal the show).

This is a different Wolverine from the one we knew – one who believes he let his own world down



Wolverine finally gets to wear his classic yellow suit





Deadpool & Wolverine sees two very different versions of masculinity join forces

CLAWS AND EFFECT

Despite closing the book on the character in 2017's mournful neo-western *Logan*, Jackman was tempted back for Wolverine's first official MCU film. In part because of his long-standing friendships with Levy and Reynolds, but also from a desire to mine new depths of the character. The Australian movie and theatre star has played a wide breadth of roles in musicals, dramas and thrillers over the years, but the hyper-masculinity of Wolverine is a stark contrast to his own all-singing, all-dancing reality, and he tells *Total Film* that explorations of masculinity are 'something I find fascinating. In Australia, our culture does give different flavours, but actually I think the more interesting thing is how connected it is. And where I connect with the character is how in both [North American and Australian cultures] there is the shame.'

When it comes to the shame that accompanies the pressure to adhere to masculine expectations he adds that, 'Hopefully there's more in the character Wolverine than there is in me, but there are repressed feelings there, right? There are all these different things I feel underneath. There is anger, there are all sorts of things that I'm obviously tapping into playing the part, so I find this role to be a gift and it's clearly something cathartic and healing for me. I know I'm being a little open here, but I think that's the real strength of these characters and comic-book movies, in that through wish fulfilment it's allowing us to collectively look at what is underneath.'

Reynolds has also subverted the expectations around the prototypical Hollywood leading man with his willingness to poke fun at himself, including but not limited

'DEADPOOL, FOR ME AT LEAST, HAS ALWAYS BEEN VERY FEMININE, AND I FIND THAT TO BE VERY FREEING'

RYAN REYNOLDS

to wearing prosthetics that make him look like a 'boiled testicle'. He explains to *Total Film* that despite one half of the film's double act being an embodiment of old-school brooding masculinity and the other being a pansexual motormouthed violent pervert, they have more in common than a supernatural ability to heal.

'They're both in a deep, internalised routine of shame, where so many different maladaptive coping mechanisms come out,' Reynolds says. 'For Deadpool, it's using humour to deflect anything that might render him vulnerable. And for Wolverine, it's really a sense of masculinity and violence.' But beyond the shame spirals at their cores, Reynolds sees a contrast in expression. 'Deadpool, for me at least, has always been very feminine, and I find that to be very freeing,' the actor says. 'I'm not bound by any of the constraints of that sort of traditional to toxically masculine portrayal of a superhero.'

Jackman now holds the record for the longest career as a live-action Marvel character and has been portraying anger issues via adamantium-claw carnage for 24 years. But unlike the hype surrounding his latest outing, his debut in 2000's *X-Men* came with markedly lower expectations. 'We were on the low-tide version of that genre,' Jackman recalls. 'It'd gone way up with the Batman movies and fizzled out. But when the X-Men came in, people felt like it represented the source material about giving voice to the marginalised.'

Audiences poured into cinemas expecting something splashy and fun and instead watched a film that opened with a child being torn away from his mother ➡

Emma Corrin is new bad guy Cassandra Nova



The TVA give Deadpool's suit an upgrade for this third film



Hugh Jackman is still doing an incredible job of playing a man who barely ages



➤➤ at the gates of Auschwitz, and explored Wolverine's palpable PTSD. Jackman's star was launched into the stratosphere, but according to the actor, 'Actually, a couple of people in the industry with their ear to the ground told me, "Keep auditioning because this thing is dead in the water."' One can only hope whoever those people were have since ceased giving actors such terrible advice, as Jackman's Wolverine would appear in nine more films, including cameos. Meanwhile, when *Deadpool* came out in 2016, the superhero genre was going from blockbuster behemoth to blockbuster behemoth, but Reynolds points out that 'the movies were quite congruent with each other at that point. *Deadpool* was different, and then right after *Logan* was potentially the greatest comic-book adaptation ever made.'

MASK FORCE

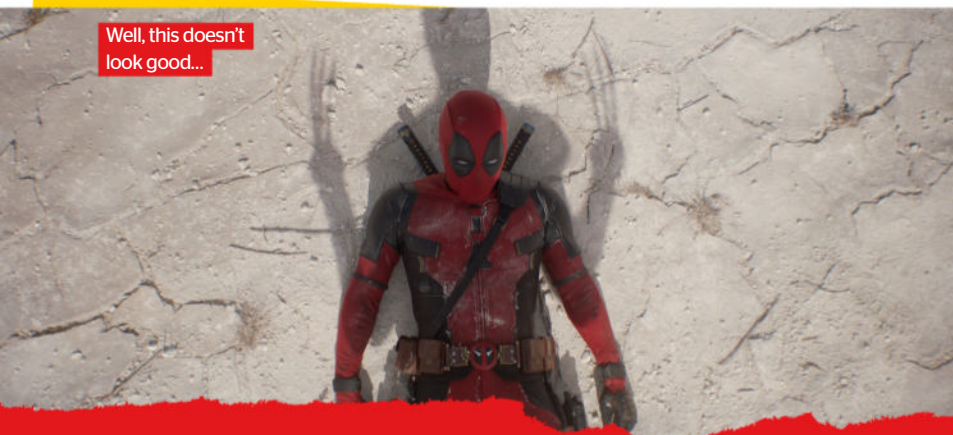
Unlike his stars, Levy is new to this world and remembers seeing *Deadpool* on its opening weekend and thinking, 'What am I even watching?!' But now these former underdogs have become titans of the genre, and the pressure is on Levy, which is ironic given the premise is, as the filmmaker puts it: 'Welcome to the bigs. Do you even belong here?'

'RYAN CO-WROTE AND CO-PRODUCED AND STARS IN THIS MOVIE, AND HE STILL OUT-HUSTLES, OUT-WORKS, OUT-GRINDS EVERYBODY'

SHAWN LEVY

Even for Reynolds, with his proven track record, there is no room for taking comfort in a near-guaranteed success ('If I ever thought that, we'd be fucked'), and Levy reminds *Total Film* this isn't just a case of going to the gym and landing zingers. 'I've worked with actors who get huge and with increased stardom comes increased complacency,' the director notes. 'Bear in mind, Ryan co-wrote and co-produced and stars in this movie and created so much of the DNA of this franchise, and he still out-hustles, out-works, out-grinds everybody.' As executive producer Wendy Jacobson puts it, on set there's always a push to strive for more and 'Ryan always just throws in these tiny flourishes'. Fittingly for the self-proclaimed Marvel messiah, 'It's like he's channelling something from the Divine.' Even after scenes are shot, the nature of

Well, this doesn't look good...



Peggy, a pug-and-Chinese-crested cross from East Yorkshire, debuts as Dogpool





'A quarry? What is this, *Doctor Who*?'

having a masked protagonist works to their advantage, thanks to the magic of ADR. 'We do have the capability to keep punching it up and we take audience feedback really seriously,' Jacobson adds. 'Lucky for us none of the filmmakers and writers are super-precious and like, "I wrote this line and it's got to be this." So if a moment or a joke they're obsessed with falls flat on its face, it's out of the movie.'

That relentless quest to make *Deadpool & Wolverine* as good as it possibly can be meant that Reynolds, though he was keen to bring Levy on board for their third film in a row together, felt it was only fair to warn him that with great power comes crushing responsibility. 'I told [Shawn]: "There's a reason it's been so many years since the last one. It will swallow your entire life whole. It is hard on you. It's hard on your family. Once

you get something that you think is 100% exactly how you want it in the movie, now you have to make it 20% better.'" That's the sort of mindset you need'

While Hollywood history is littered with tales of hardship in the name of achieving greatness, Levy is quick to clear up that's not the case here. 'I've done like 15 movies and my God, so many stars are assholes!' he says. 'But the ones like Ryan, who are every bit as nice, hardworking, and thoughtful as you'd hope, are such a treat.' Many all-time classics have had infamously tough sets, but for Levy, 'I don't believe art needs to be generated out of torment.' Clearly not being an asshole is working for this team, with Levy now set to solidify his place in the big leagues and follow up his MCU film with a Star Wars one (and, you would imagine, any future *Deadpool* sequels).



DREAM TEAM-UP

WHO SHOULD DEADPOOL BUDDY UP WITH NEXT?

WENDY JACOBSON:

Titania, played by Jameela Jamil in *She-Hulk*. She's such a heightened, hilarious character and also an actor who can improv and is razor-sharp and can banter. I can't imagine being an actor, period, but I can't imagine having to work opposite someone like Ryan Reynolds, who is just so quick and so smart and so funny all the time - but that woman could handle it.

RYAN REYNOLDS:

I made a movie called *Mississippi Grind* and I would love to see *Deadpool* hanging out with my character in that, Curtis. Seeing those two guys, because they have some overlap but there is something really sad about both of them, too. I'd love [that to] just be explored a little bit. How about you, Hugh?

HUGH JACKMAN:

I'd love to see [*The Greatest Showman*'s] P.T. Barnum. We could do a musical together!

RYAN REYNOLDS:

Don't tease now. *Deadpool* and P.T. Barnum, I'm in already. We're writing the treatment as we speak...

SHAWN LEVY:

The thing about *Deadpool* is I think he makes everything more interesting because of his audacity. But, boy, I'd sure love to see *Deadpool* and Spidey. That's a movie I'd love to make. I feel like Tom Holland would run circles around everyone else.



Shawn Levy takes over directing duties for this third *Deadpool* film



Reynolds has said that Peggy was the animal version of Wade Wilson

➤➤ Despite all the positivity this team brought to the project, there is a spectre at the feast, as the last time these two characters met up the reception was not exactly rapturous. *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* became infamous for literally removing the mouth from a character best known for never shutting up. But Levy points out ‘that was very much an X-Men movie. This is very much a *Deadpool* movie and the rules are zero rules.’ Though that first meeting is one of the less-beloved entries in Wolverine’s canon, the desire to do the union right has been explicit since the end credits of *Deadpool 2*, which saw Wade travel back into *Origins* to shoot his mouthless incarnation through the skull and plead with Wolverine that ‘Your old pal Wade is going to ask you to get back in the saddle again and when he does, say yes.’

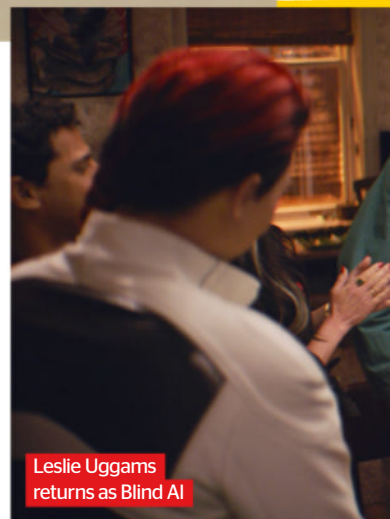
BUDDY GOOD SHOW

Jackman has no regrets about getting back on the horse. ‘I thought I was done but like a bolt of lightning I just knew I wanted to do it.’ He and Reynolds are also clearly thrilled to see each other when their paired interview with *Total Film* kicks off, regularly showering each other with praise and deferring to each other’s expertise. But as anyone who follows them online will be aware, the pair’s love language is teasing each other (see p40). Jackman requests that there be ‘only friendly fire’, but moments later he jokes that the press tour itinerary involves having their eyes propped open with toothpicks and being made to watch Ryan Reynolds sitcoms.

Levy can’t help but laugh when he quotes *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, which was the film’s greatest inspiration (‘Those aren’t pillows!’), pointing out that ‘it has so much warmth and it’s really this lovely redemptive story of a journey that changes its travellers’. That film combined

the inimitable comedic talents of Steve Martin and the late, great John Candy. While Wolverine has a desert-dry sense of humour compared to quip king Deadpool, Jacobson says that ‘[Hugh is] just as funny as Ryan in this movie. It’s all in an eye-roll and a little zinger here and there.’

The two actors have contrasting challenges. Jackman has to perform with minimal dialogue but seems sincerely floored by what Reynolds accomplished with his face concealed. ‘When I went to film from theatre, everyone said this medium is ultimately about the eyes, and for the majority of the movie that is not there,’ Jackman explains. ‘To watch Ryan do this very detailed work where he’ll do another take after looking at it because that movement of a wrist communicates something different from that and be that specific about it was a masterclass.’ There are difficulties, too,



Leslie Uggams returns as Blind Al





As ever, Deadpool's red suit helps hide the blood - well, his blood at least



'I THOUGHT I WAS DONE BUT LIKE A BOLT OF LIGHTNING I JUST KNEW I WANTED TO DO IT'

HUGH JACKMAN



Wolverine once said his adamantium claws hurt 'every time' - ouch

in stretching yourself vocally when you are speaking through fabric, but just as Deadpool's suit gets an upgrade (thanks, TVA), so did the filmmaking tech. Jacobson singles out 'our talented sound mixer Colin Nicolson, who basically invented a new kind of mic that was inside Ryan's mask to capture sound in a way that gave us so much clarity and didn't necessarily have the muffle that we're used to hearing from Deadpool.'

Levy is thrilled to be asked about the challenges of having an odd couple made odder by only one of them having his face on view. 'I could literally do an entire interview about the physical virtuosity of Ryan Reynolds as Deadpool, because trust me, nobody sees quite how brilliant it is because he makes it look so intuitive and effortless,' Levy says. 'You have this gruff, often non-verbal Wolverine against essentially circus-clown physical performing.' Most children growing up dreaming of being superheroes would not necessarily be hoping to be the boiled-testicle-hyper-sexual-clown one, but Reynolds is also happy to take those descriptors.

'When I was a kid I adored and really worshipped clowns,' he explains. 'So much of what I do with Deadpool is clown work. I remember the first time I ever put the suit on, I asked for just a day with a small skeleton camera crew to just play in this suit. The first few hours I was screwing it all up, and then I started to kinda get the hang of it, and grew it from there.'

KNIVES OUT

As the films, franchise and expectations grew around Reynolds - the addition of Wolverine now adding further star power - it was important for the series not to grow too large. As Jackman explains: 'In the MCU we see a lot of universe saving. But Wolverine and Deadpool are at their best when fighting something smaller and quite emotional.' But beyond an emotional connection that peels back layers on each character's metaphorical onions, there will be some exceptional badassery to enjoy, with Deadpool's shiny new adamantium katanas (thanks again, TVA) and Wolverine's faithful claws meaning they aren't resorting to flying through the air and shooting beams of energy at one another from a distance. For Reynolds, the forced proximity of their weapons of choice 'makes the fights more interesting'. Even a seasoned pro like Jackman, who's been performing superhero scraps for over two decades, found fresh approaches to the action here. 'I went from being at a point where I was like, "I can't think of one more thing I could possibly do in a fight sequence," to all of a sudden being in a movie where I'm doing all these things and in situations I've never been in before.'

Also, let's face it, proximity can lead to more than fighting, and adding as horny a character as Deadpool to Wolverine's life is going to change things up. In terms of sexual frisson between the pair, Jackman says, 'I never get that from Wolverine, but Deadpool can find sex in just about anything.' Beyond buddy movies, the path of hatred transforming into friendship is just as often ➡



Jackman has expressed admiration for Reynolds' ability to act through a mask



Drugs are out, but Deadpool can still find ways to get high...



Cast and crew between takes on set

the basis of a beautiful love story. When *Total Film* suggests this pairing of a powerful taciturn man and a feisty figure who speaks their mind could become the MCU's own Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, Reynolds gasps like a Regency heroine. 'I feel so elevated by that comparison, goodness gracious!' Jackman concedes, 'For Wolverine sex is equated to doing everything you can not to kill somebody, then I guess that's true.' Before Reynolds adds, 'When it comes to sex, these cats are not your standardised metric by which to gauge normal, healthy physiological functions.'

But in a cinematic universe where everyone is beautiful and few people are horny, Deadpool is an outlier. Jacobson has worked in the MCU on *She-Hulk* and is a long-term collaborator of Dwayne Johnson, who has a noticeably chaste filmography. 'I did *Skyscraper*, *Rampage* and *San Andreas*,' Jacobson says. 'So I have a lot of experience with that kind of traditional masculinity heroism lane and it was just really exciting to work on this hyper-sexual Deadpool because it was so different.' What's more, Deadpool's brazen kink isn't just limited to him, and even seemingly wholesome Peter reveals some truly astonishing piercing choices to which Levy can only say, 'Its always the quiet ones!'

'YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH A LOT IF YOU'RE FUNNY ENOUGH AND YOU ARE A HUMANIST STORY'

SHAWN LEVY

Peter's freshly studded genitals jangling in the wind as people seem to be pegging each other all the live long day is one thing, but when Blind Al suggests snorting some lines of Columbian marching powder, Deadpool quips, 'Cocaine is the one thing Feige says is off the table!' Even now, Levy seems nervous. 'I'm so wary of what I can say but certainly there were early conversations about overt drug use and we thought that was an interesting conversation. Let's actually write a dialogue scene about having had it.' That mischievousness seems to know no bounds and when *Total Film* mentions that it was an ex that introduced them to the *Deadpool* comics, the actors immediately start brainstorming revenge ideas, with Jackman suggesting a billboard or just 'DM us your ex's name, Ryan is still doing ADR and can put in some subliminal messaging.' Reynolds escalates with 'I'm not above sending them a strongly worded video.'

X-RATED

It's that naughtiness that makes spending time with Deadpool and the team behind it so much fun, but in an age where comedians complain about how audiences have become too sensitive and are unable to take a joke any more, Levy explains that 'you can get away with

BEST FRENEMIES

DOCUMENTING RYAN REYNOLDS' AND HUGH JACKMAN'S LONG-STANDING SOCIAL-MEDIA 'FEUD'





Cassandra Nova is telepathic with telekinetic abilities



Welcome to the Time Variance Authority...

a lot if you're funny enough and you are a humanist story. At the core of this movie, there is not a cynical view of people.' But beyond the warm fuzzy centre of this redemption story, 'I would also add that Deadpool is an equal-opportunity offender. So there's a freedom to say and do audacious things because no one is safe.'

The fourth-wall breaking means that Deadpool can stare out at the audience and crack jokes about movie executives, actors and even the audience itself, just as *She-Hulk* did in her Disney+ outing. But Jacobson points out this is not a gimmick as, 'Like in *She-Hulk*, Deadpool breaking the fourth wall is so ingrained in the publishing history and who these characters are.' Reynolds explains that it means 'Deadpool also really gets to be the audience, and one thing I never let go of working with Hugh is I'm genuinely his number-one fan. You can equate that in the Kathy Bates, Stephen



Just like Annie Wilkes, Reynolds is Jackman's 'number-one fan'

King context or in just the healthy, mature, two-grown-ass-adult-guys-who've-done-a-lot-of-work-on-themselves-and-are-able-to-have-a-really-wonderful-connection... Let's go with the latter.' So in this instance, art is imitating life, imitating art as 'we have to go through conflict with these two, but in Deadpool's heart there is a genuine love for this guy.'

That genuine love seems to extend across the team. After a very long road with the finishing line in sight, Levy says he's grateful to be talking to *Total Film* as 'nothing makes me happier than talking about this thing that I love'. While Jacobson believes they've created a film that, particularly given how thick and fast the jokes come, has unprecedented rewatchability. 'When you're in post on a movie or a show and you're watching it a million times you would think that it gets old. But for me it's still funny. I

laugh out loud at the same jokes. It's the gift that keeps on giving.' And as for Marvel Jesus himself, the pressure might be on, but he's extremely grateful to all those who had faith in him. 'There's a part of me that feels like this is the most exciting moment of my life,' Reynolds says in a rare moment of straight-talking sincerity ahead of release. 'I'm in the big leagues.'



Spot the nod to Deadpool co-creator Rob Liefeld

DEADPOOL & WOLVERINE IS OUT NOW.

MAKING OF



ONCE MORE, WITH FEELINGS



Total Film heads to Pixar Animation Studios to get inside the heads of the filmmaking team behind *Inside Out 2*, the sequel to one of the most acclaimed animated movies of the past decade. With new emotions, bigger locations and the onset of teenage angst to explore, this promises to be another mind-expanding, deeply felt interior adventure.

WORDS MATT MAYTUM

It's perfectly teed up, right?!" says director Kelsey Mann of sequel *Inside Out 2*, which takes its cue from emotion Joy's final line in the 2015 original: 'After all, Riley's 12 now,' says Joy (voiced by Amy Poehler). 'What could happen?'

That's the question that Mann and his team are looking to answer in this summer's sequel, which finds Riley, aged 13, dealing with puberty, hockey try-outs and a brace of new emotions.

'Kelsey and I are both fathers of teenage girls, which made exploring this stage in our children's lives really meaningful, and actually really helpful,' says producer Mark Nielsen when *Total Film* visits Pixar Animation Studios in Emeryville, California (not far from the San Francisco setting of *Inside Out*).

We're shown the first 30 minutes of the sequel in one of Pixar's screening rooms, and also tour the Steve Jobs Building, with its vast atrium designed for casual colleague mingling. Concept imagery decorates the walls here,

giving much of the space a gallery-like feel and showcasing the absurd levels of imagination that go into a movie like this, while filmmaking team Mann and Nielsen, production designer Jason Deamer and director of photography Adam Habib talk us through the sequel.

'[Really good sequels] actually expand the world, and build upon it, and open new doors in the world that you didn't know were there,' says Mann. So join us, then, as we embark on a (literally) mind-expanding tour of Riley's innermost thoughts...

EMOTION CAPTURE

With the teenage years come unfamiliar emotions, so it was inevitable that some new characters would join Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear and Disgust. 'I wanted new emotions to show up, but I wasn't sure which ones,' says Mann. 'I made a whole list of all these options that I could do. I remember being drawn to Anxiety, and I kind of circled it, and I thought, "I think there's something here."' "

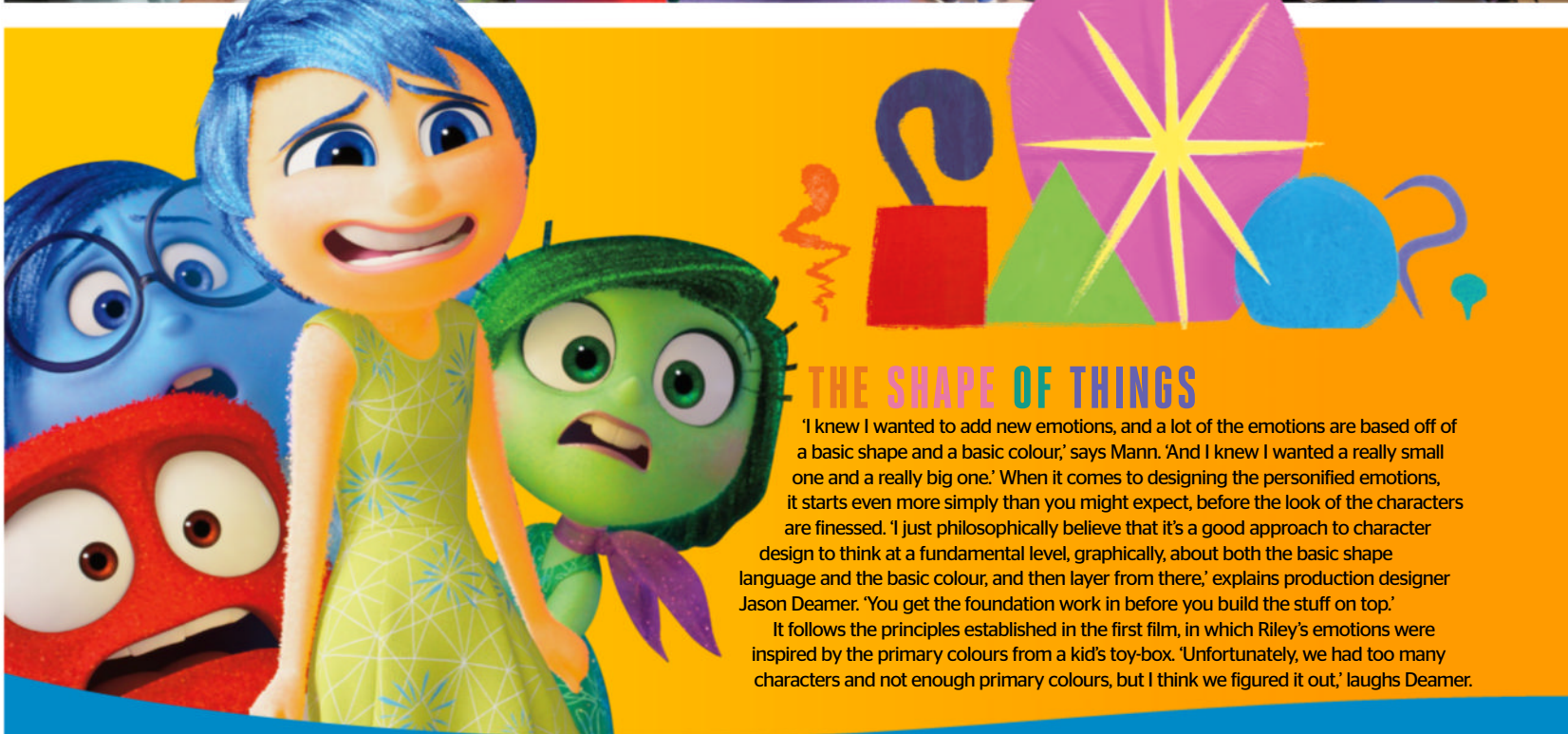
Also joining the fold are Ennui, Embarrassment and Envy (Nostalgia also popped up briefly in the footage we saw). 'I knew that I wanted to deal with more complex emotions coming to Riley's console, in addition to all the emotions that we know and love with the first film,' says Mann. 'They're going to have to deal with new emotions coming upstairs to headquarters.'

ANXIETY MAYA HAWKE

'We do [the voice casting] blind where we don't know who the actors are,' says Nielsen. 'And, man, the second we heard Maya, and it was clips properly pulled from *Stranger Things* and some other things she'd done - she's got this amazing ability to talk really, really fast, and say a thousand words in three seconds. And there's just a nervous energy to it that we picked up on in some of her clips, and we were like, "She could be brilliant at this."' "

EMBARRASSMENT PAUL WALTER HAUSER

'I remember thinking, "Oh, wait, I think he should be the largest of all the emotions, because that emotion wants to not be seen, and not be noticed. And if he's the largest one, it's his worst nightmare,"' says Mann. 'Paul Walter Hauser, he's just incredible, and so funny,' adds Nielsen. 'But it was a bit of a tough sell. Because when you describe it or see it on paper, it doesn't look like it's much of a role, because he doesn't talk! We had about a three-and-a-half-hour session with Paul Walter Hauser doing nothing but vocalisations. No actual lines.'



THE SHAPE OF THINGS

'I knew I wanted to add new emotions, and a lot of the emotions are based off of a basic shape and a basic colour,' says Mann. 'And I knew I wanted a really small one and a really big one.' When it comes to designing the personified emotions, it starts even more simply than you might expect, before the look of the characters are finessed. 'I just philosophically believe that it's a good approach to character design to think at a fundamental level, graphically, about both the basic shape language and the basic colour, and then layer from there,' explains production designer Jason Deamer. 'You get the foundation work in before you build the stuff on top.'

It follows the principles established in the first film, in which Riley's emotions were inspired by the primary colours from a kid's toy-box. 'Unfortunately, we had too many characters and not enough primary colours, but I think we figured it out,' laughs Deamer.

ENNUI ADÈLE EXARCHOPOULOS

'We love the idea - because they're more complex emotions - of having one be multilingual,' says Nielsen. 'And because it's a French word, we're like: "What if she could speak English and French?"' And so we found the incredible Adèle Exarchopoulos to do the voice because she's got a very deep register, and it just fits so well with the emotion that comes out of that character.' But, adds Mann, 'I also wanted somebody who was not putting on the accent, but who was really doing it for real.'

ENVY AYO EDEBIRI

'Envy is one of my favourite new characters,' explains Mann. 'It took a lot of development to get Envy. In fact, we even had Jealousy in the movie. I almost had them be twins, so that no one could ever tell the difference between the two of them. But envy is the feeling that you wish you have what others have. Envy, we were like, "She should be the smallest one! Because she wishes she was as tall as everyone else. She wishes she could reach the console like everybody else can."'



DOG DAYS

A visit to a vault of Riley's secrets introduces a few fresh faces, such as Bloofy, the 2D-animated dog who fronts a pre-school show that Riley still enjoys. These characters require a different animation style.

'It's an older technique, you would think,' says Deamer. 'But we have to insert that into a three-dimensional environment. Do you project it onto a card that cuts out, so that it's actually a card that's walking around? Do we do it in post?'

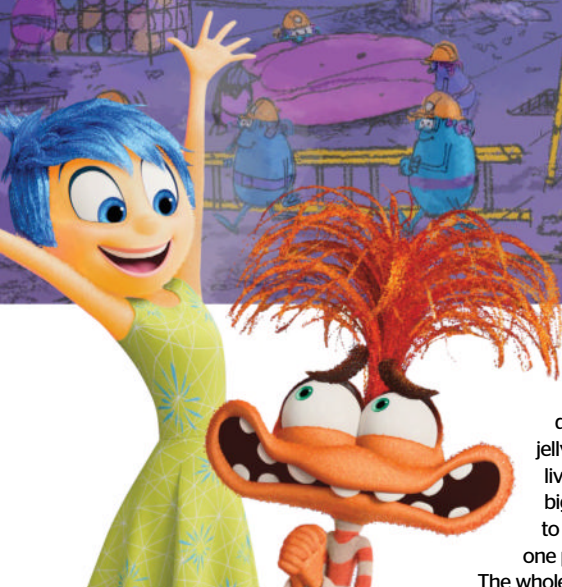
'You can't go too 2D. If it's 100% flat, it'll stick out like a sore thumb. So we had a lot of talk about, "How much light attenuation going across the surface do we do? Does he cast a shadow on the floor? Is the shadow two-dimensionally rendered?"'



CHARACTER BUILDING

In *Inside Out 2*, Anxiety will have one of the biggest impacts on the newly teenage Riley. When designing these characters, though, Deamer wanted to push the boat out and make the new characters more... Muppet-y. 'We're making animation, so why be bound?' he muses. 'I always

thought that Anger and Fear of the first cast lived, the most, up to the promise of the exaggerated "anatomical choices". They're the most pushed away from human shapes. They're the ones that were the most successful to me. And I wanted to do that here. I pushed really hard to do so - I mean, within limits. We need eyes. We need eyebrows. We need mouths for dialogue. And hands...'



CONSOLE UPGRADE

When the puberty alarm sounds, it's demolition day at the emotions' HQ, and the jellybean-shaped mind workers roll in to rip up the living area, replacing the console with a newer, bigger, more sensitive piece of kit for Joy et al. to work with. After concept drawings (like the one pictured here) come animated storyboards. The whole film is created in a roughly animated 2D style

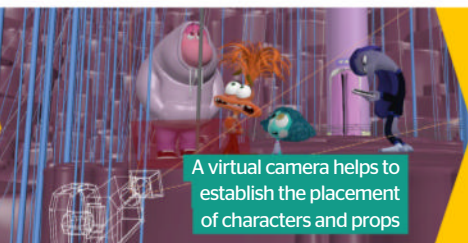
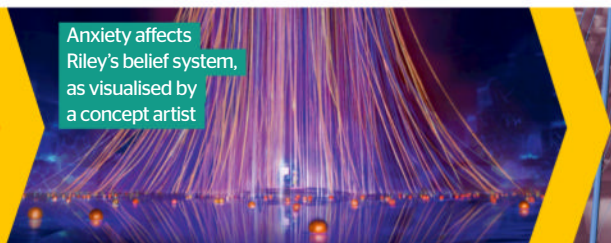
before the 3D animation begins, and then the layout team begins spacing out the environment.

'If you look at the [story]boards... that's a flat drawing,' says layout lead Ryan Heuett. 'But when we get to the 3D environment there's so much depth in that set, so artist Mike Leonard started doing all these cool vignettes to show that HQ was under construction.' A 'camera' was also added with a dolly shot going from left to right, so 'you can see all these little vignettes and you can also see how much depth is in that set... It really took on a whole new life from storyboards.'



A storyboard artist sketches out key story beats and camera angles

Anxiety affects Riley's belief system, as visualised by a concept artist



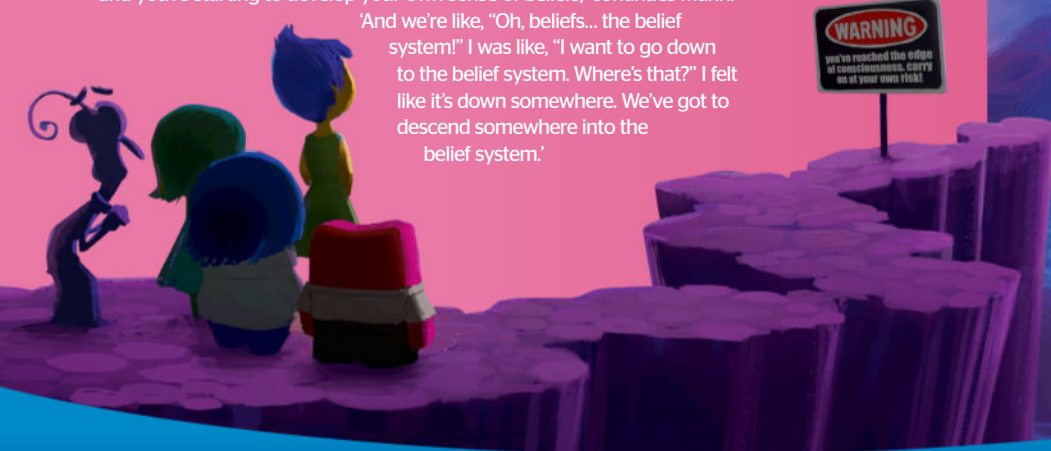
A virtual camera helps to establish the placement of characters and props

MIND TRIP

Among the areas of the mind explored this time will be Riley's belief system - a vast, dark, watery environment, with long, tendril-like strings that connect forming beliefs up to the HQ. 'The *Inside Out* world is a cool world to play in, because you can take something we can all relate to but have never seen before, like memories,' says Mann. '[The team on the first film] figured out a visual language for how they work, and what they look like. I wanted to expand that out into something new.'

The belief system was a natural extension of the story. 'We thought about Riley being a teenager, and a lot of that is, you're starting to develop into who you are as a person, and you're starting to develop your own sense of beliefs,' continues Mann.

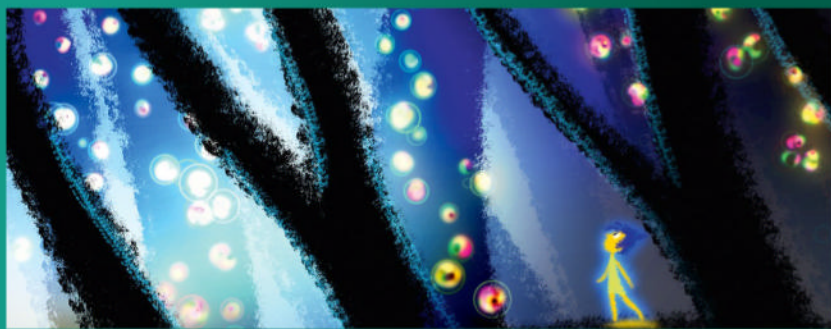
'And we're like, "Oh, beliefs... the belief system!" I was like, "I want to go down to the belief system. Where's that?" I felt like it's down somewhere. We've got to descend somewhere into the belief system.'





STRINGS ATTACHED

The belief system's strings emit a core belief when plucked, like a musical instrument. 'I'm a big believer in trying to come up with novel things. I want it. I think the people working on it want to work on something they haven't done before. And I think audiences want to see something different,' says Deamer. 'That was one of those thematic things that came and went. It wasn't always a belief system. At one point, it was these neuron-like trees. They were on a boat at one point. But I always had this idea that I wanted to do that visual thing, so I kept repurposing it.' The vibrations of the strings were inspired by close-up, slo-mo videos of guitars, and the structure of the belief system was designed to be harp-like. 'It's a nice... I don't know if it's a visual reference, but it's a sound reference to use as a visual reference.'



Ryan Heuett, Sunguk Chun and Adam Habib experiment with the virtual camera

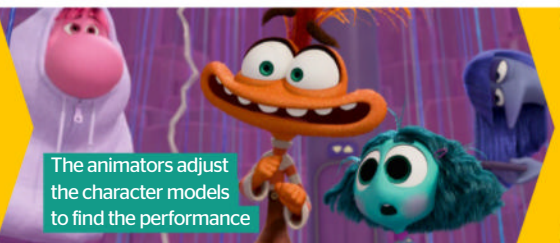
STRAIGHT SHOOTING

The 'camera' department is one of the first to get going when pre-production starts on a Pixar movie. Director of Photography Habib comes from a live-action background, and applies some of those cinematography techniques to animation. In *Inside Out 2*, the human world and mind world have contrasting camera language. The former is physical and imperfect, while the latter is virtual with mechanical camera moves.

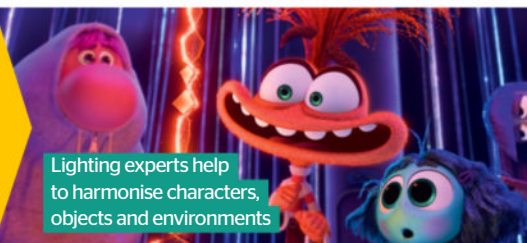
'One of the things that's really exciting about the film is that we now have this widescreen canvas,' says Habib, referring to the fact that *Inside Out 2* has been shot in the wider 2.39:1 aspect ratio, as opposed to the original film's 1.85:1. 'The whole idea that we had in the first film was that the human-world camera, which is Riley's story, would have a lot more tactile imperfection and a physical quality to it - and the mind-world camera, Joy's world, is almost like a virtual camera. With the new widescreen format of *Inside Out 2*, we took that a little bit further by making the human world camera an anamorphic lens. So it's just a little more textured, a little more detailed.'



Alternate shots are explored during the staging phase



The animators adjust the character models to find the performance



Lighting experts help to harmonise characters, objects and environments



EMOTIONAL IMPACT

'The inspiration for what Riley is going through comes from a personal place for me,' admits Mann, who was digitising old family photos when he realised that he looked a lot less happy on his birthdays as he hit his teenage years. 'It just felt like it was the right time to tell a great story about a difficult time in a lot of our lives.' There were also ideas that didn't make the finished film that could be picked up for another instalment, which the *Inside Out 2* team did with certain elements left over from the first film. 'There's stuff that I'm like, "That's a good idea, and that's really funny. It needs to be seen at some point,"' says Mann. 'There are both characters and sets that landed on the cutting room floor that deserve to live and see another day,' adds Nielsen.

INSIDE OUT 2 IS OUT NOW.

CLOSE ENCLOSURE



82 RIDLEY SCOTT
88 NATALIE PORTMAN
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104 JACK BLACK
110 DIABLO CODY
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INTERVIEWS



Great Scott

Ridley on his biggest hits of the past (and the future)...

WORDS JAMIE GRAHAM

Ridley Scott's always been a plain and confident talker, and at 85 years of age, he's not about to change. Asked to cast an eye over his 46-year film career, he rotates his coffee cup on its saucer and says, 'Every film I do, I have no regrets about anything. I think they've all been, without question, pretty fucking good. My films tend not to age. I can flick on [1977 debut] *The Duellists* and I'm blown away because it could have been made last week.'

He's not one for false modesty, and fair play to him. With 27 movies under his belt, earning a combined \$4.3bn at the worldwide box office (making him the 11th highest grosser), he is a genuine visionary. Whether stepping into the future (*Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *The Martian*) or the past (*Gladiator*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, *The Last Duel*), he constructs immersive worlds that transport viewers and influence other filmmakers. Nestled below the handful of masterpieces – most directors don't have one – is a bunch of excellent films across various genres and styles, including *Someone to Watch Over Me*, *Hannibal* (seriously, revisit it), *Black Hawk Down*, *Matchstick Men*, *American Gangster* and *The Counsellor*.

And then there are the iconic characters: Ripley, Deckard, Maximus, Mark Watney, and, of course, Thelma and Louise. Heck, even *Alien*'s cat, Jonesy, is a legend. All have sparked countless and endless conversations. So let's see what Scott has to say about them, and his films, in his own words...



Alien 1979

In space, a blue-collar crew fight a truly terrifying ET...

'I was fifth choice [as director] on *Alien*. The last guy they'd given it to was Robert Altman. Robert Altman went, "What the fuck? Are you kidding me?" But I read it, and I went, "I know what to do." Because a lot of it, on face value, is art direction. If you don't have that alien, you ain't got shit. You've got a dodgy B-movie. The simplicity of the story – seven people locked in a tin can in space, and not being able to get out – is about as B-movie as you can possibly get. *Alien* is a B-movie horror movie done in an A-plus way.

'Ripley was written as a guy. And then [studio boss] Alan Ladd Jr. said, "Listen, what happens if Ripley's a woman?" I thought, "That's a great idea." So I went on the hunt for a woman. Somebody mentioned that there's this young woman on the boards in New York off-Broadway called Sigourney Weaver...

'The first time I talked to Kubrick was a week after *Alien* came out. Somebody said, "Stanley Kubrick is on the line." I said, "Hello?" "Hello. Stanley Kubrick here. How are you? I just saw *Alien*." Straight in. "How on earth did you get that thing coming out of his chest? Because I've got a print, and I've run it on the machine, and I can't see the cut." So I said, "Well, I had John Hurt cut a hole in the table, lie in a horrible, awkward position, and I made a fibreglass shell..." He said, "I got it, I got it, I got it. Brilliant."





Blade Runner 1982

Replicant or human, you'll see things you wouldn't believe...

'*Blade Runner* was a monumental, five-month, day-by-day evolution with Hampton Fancher, who was a very special writer. He had this peculiar cadence with the rhythm of his style, which I loved. But I brought the world to it, because he'd written a play that was set in an apartment, where the hunter has kept his quarry, and fallen in love with her. I said, "But what's going on in the world outside?" So it evolved from that moment on.

'[The shoot] was a very bad experience for me. I had horrendous partners. Financial guys, who were killing me every day. I'd been very successful in the running of a company, and I knew I was making something very, very special. So I would never take no for an answer. But they didn't understand what they had. You shoot it, and you edit it, and you mix it. And by the time you're halfway through, everyone's saying it's too slow. You've got to learn, as a director, you can't listen to anybody. I knew I was making something very, very special. And now it's one of the most important science-fiction films ever made which everybody feeds off. Every bloody film.

'I hadn't seen *Blade Runner* for 20 years. Really. But I just watched it. And it's not slow. The information coming at you is so original and interesting, talking about biological creations, and mining off-world, which, in those days, they said was silly. I say, "Go fuck yourself."

Thelma & Louise 1991

Two best friends make the patriarchy eat their dust...

'I'm very conscious of strong women. It probably came from my mum, who ran the roost.

'*Thelma & Louise* was brought to me by Callie [Khorri, screenwriter]. I read it, and I thought it was a comedy. She said, "Comedy?" I said, "Callie, a lot of this is pretty funny." She'd brought it to me to produce. So I went around various directors. There were very few female directors at that point. Whereas today, I'd have gone for a female director. So I went to guys. One of them said, "I've got a problem with the women." I said, "Well, that's the whole point of the story, you dope. They have a voice." Funnily enough, it was Michelle Pfeiffer [who passed on *Thelma & Louise* because it clashed with *Love Field*] who said, "Why don't you come to your senses, and you direct it?"

'Off that, I did. And that's when Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis came in. We went on the road. I still saw it as being – I don't like using this sleek word but I'll use it now – a "dramedy".

'We had the *Time* magazine cover, and I was the only one who wasn't mentioned. But I happened to have been there, doing it. And I also cast Brad Pitt, by the way. And I was the camera operator. I'm not irritated or angry, but when you get a Formula One car, you better have a good driver.'



Gladiator 2000

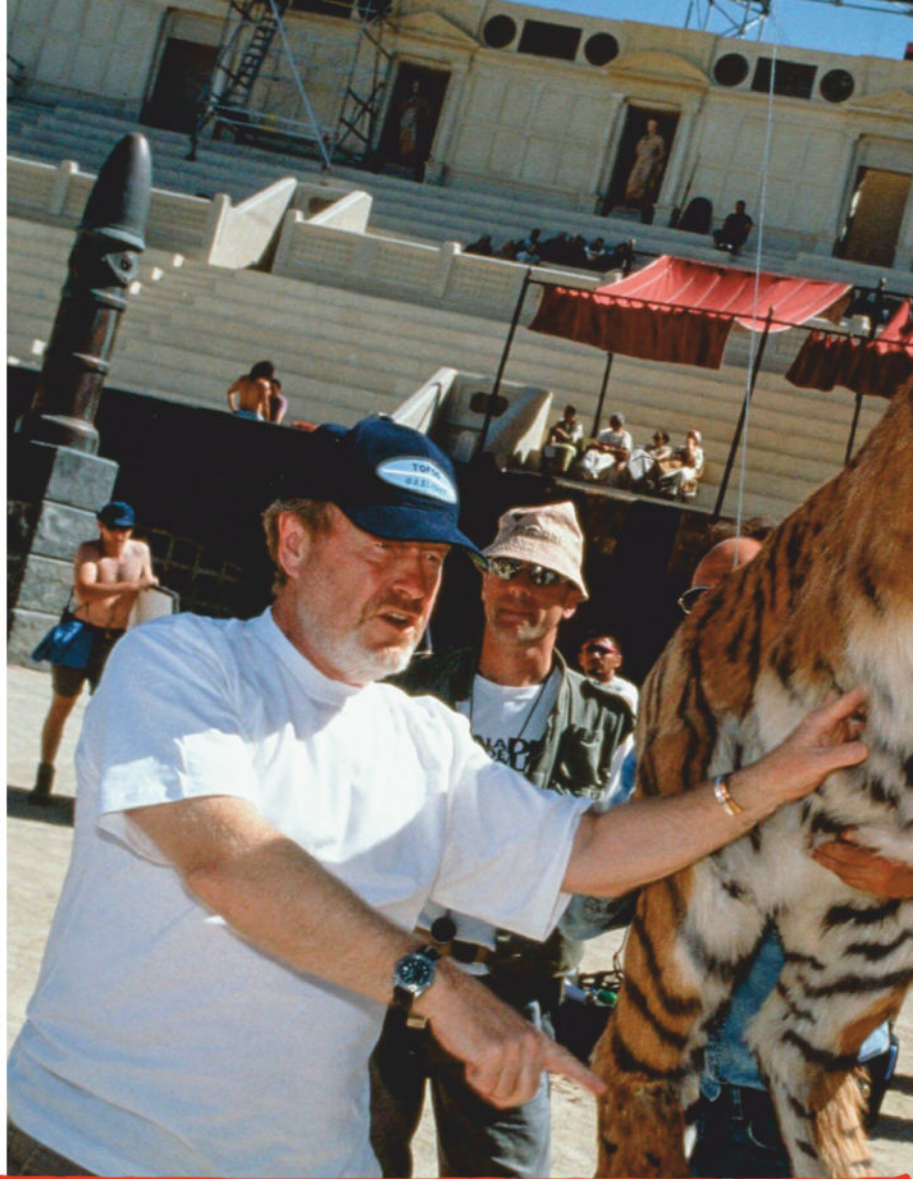
A slave fights for vengeance. You will be entertained...

'On *Gladiator*, a buddy of mine, Michael Mann, said, "You've got to pay attention to this guy I've just finished working with on a film about the tobacco industry. He's called Russell Crowe." So I met Russell, who spent two hours talking about the fact that he was overweight, and that he would lose weight. And off I went with Russell.

'Then during it, I was staring at how to avoid the clichés of what they call "spear, sword and sandal" bullshit. Because mostly they're pretty bad. I suddenly thought – the golden oldies: Richard Harris as Marcus Aurelius; Oliver Reed as a slave trader; David Hemmings as the impresario of the Colosseum. Russell said, "Who the hell are these guys?" And I said, "Wait and see." And he was blown away by Harris.

'I knew it would be a hit. I smell the essence. I learned to do that in commercials. I did some very good period things for commercial-making, where it's a very strong marriage between wardrobe, how you shoot it, the technique you use. You've got to smell it.

'My films always [influence other movies]. "Oh, he's got a hand on the wheat field! I wonder where that fucking came from?" Of course, I'm very aware of how influential *Gladiator* is. But it's a compliment, so I don't mind.'



The Counselor 2013

A lawyer loses his head when he tries a spot of drug-trafficking...

'*Blood Meridian* we couldn't get going – because it was so dark and bloody. Cormac [McCarthy, author] then sent me *The Counselor*. It was the best dialogue I'd ever had. I was blown away. How do you think I got Penélope Cruz, Michael Fassbender, Javier Bardem, Brad Pitt, Cameron Diaz, on a deal? We made that whole bloody film for \$32 million, all in. Not \$200 million – \$32 million.

'You're drawn into this sense of, "This is going to go to a bad place." I think it's fascinating. Even when you're seeing Michael Fassbender buy a diamond for a very special person, there's somehow a warning in the discussion. Bruno Ganz, the diamond seller, says, "Be careful. Is she worth it? If she's worth it, be careful you don't lose her." Then Brad Pitt is warning him: "I wouldn't do this if I was you. Once you're in, you're in." Only Cormac can write like this. He died [in June this year, aged 89], so God bless him.

'It's Guillermo del Toro's favourite movie. I think it's one of my best movies. The *Chicago Tribune* said it was the best film they've seen in years. *Chicago Tribune* usually kills me, and there were four pages of accolades. You know, 42 years ago, Pauline Kael saw *Blade Runner*, and the article begins with: "Oh, baby, let it rain." Which is a serious case of sarcasm. She destroyed the film in four pages. I was so crushed. I had a hard time making it, and yet I thought I delivered something special. And then to have it killed... It actually affected the release of the movie. I took the four pages and I framed them on the wall of my office. They're still there today, because there's a lesson in that, which is: "When you think you've got it, you don't know shit."





Gladiator 2 2024

The son of Maximus and Lucilla goes into battle...

'Why now? It didn't have a script [before]. We tried, actually, four years ago, and I chose a very good writer who couldn't get his head around it. He wrestled. He was terribly upset that he didn't deliver. He's a friend of mine. I said, "You're not getting there?" He said, "No."

'That took 10 months. So it went dead. And then we circled the wagons again, coming back with a very obvious idea, and why not? There's a survivor. The survivor is the son of the union between Lucilla and Maximus.

'Can I see Paul Mescal being as big as Russell Crowe? For sure. I watched *Normal People*. It's not my kind of show but I saw four episodes in a row – boom, boom, boom. I was thinking, "Who the hell is this Paul Mescal?" And then I watched the whole series. And then, suddenly, *Gladiator 2* came up, because the script was working pretty well. And I kept thinking about Paul. And that was it.

'I respect Denzel Washington tremendously [after working together on *American Gangster*]. I shouldn't call Denzel a golden oldie – he'd fucking kill me – but he's gold dust. As for Denzel's character... There were businesses of gladiators who could indeed earn their freedom if they stayed alive. That was the deal. That's not fiction. So we went right into that, in depth. Where did he come from? How was he taken? He was branded with marks, and registered with a brand on his chest as a slave. So that's how he comes into the story. And he's unforgiving in terms of anything Roman, except, ironically, he's built a very rich and wealthy career of earning his way out into freedom, and now he has slave schools himself. He's an arms dealer. He supplies food and merchandise for the armies in Europe. So he's a rich guy who's still carrying a grudge.'

The Martian 2015

An astronaut stranded on Mars survives on home-grown poo-tatoes...

'*The Martian* had been sat on the shelf for about 18 months, and then somebody said, "Could you look at this script, and see what you think?" I said, "It's a comedy." They said, "What?" I said, "Yeah. What could be more comedic than staying alive, and using your own poo to grow food?"

'Matt is brilliant at playing John Doe. His humour is very cool. He's got this really marvellous touch of realness in whatever he does. But he can carry off that dry humour. He doesn't go for the laugh – it's there.

'The stage we shot in is in Budapest. It has a bigger cubic capacity than the Bond stage. I made a brand-new green screen, and spent a lot of money on the deserts and the living spaces – the igloos, right? I'd already chosen a place in Jordan, and I'd photographed everything in Jordan from the same position. So we registered these positions so that they dovetail into that green screen. Wasn't it perfect?

'So I shot the film first, and having been to the location, then I shot it all again. When he's outside at the very beginning of the film, that's all in Jordan. The stuff around the igloo living quarters is in a studio. If you know what you're doing, digital is a tool.'



INTERVIEW MATT MAYTUM

‘I SPECIFICALLY
LOOK FOR ROLES
THAT ARE NOT
LIKE MY LIFE’

NATALIE PORTMAN

Natalie Portman has already amassed a three-decade body of work that includes awards glory, billion-dollar blockbusters and searing character work, but don't expect her to rest on her laurels. She tells *Total Film* about starring in and producing *Lady in the Lake*, the Apple TV+ series that provides the latest complex showcase for her work, and the path that's led her here.

PORTRAITS STEPHANE CARDINALE, DAN DOPERALSKI



It's May 2024, and Natalie Portman is speaking to *Total Film* having wrapped another day's shoot in London on Guy Ritchie's globe-trotting adventure, *Fountain of Youth*. If it feels like an unexpected choice, well, that's to be expected from Portman, whose career has defied expectations since she began working as a child. Straight out of the gate, it was early roles in adult fare like *Leon* and Michael Mann's *Heat* that marked her out as a serious talent who could hold her own against heavyweights like Gary Oldman and Al Pacino.

The Star Wars prequel trilogy would give her a platform of unprecedented scale, but even while starring as Padmé Amidala for George Lucas, she found time for the varied likes of *Closer*, *Cold Mountain* and *Garden State* (not to mention studying for a degree in psychology at Harvard). And that eclecticism has continued since, with a filmography littered with collaborations with directors like Wes Anderson, Wong Kar-wai, Pablo Larraín and Darren Aronofsky (the latter resulting in a Best Actress Oscar for *Black Swan*), nestled alongside broader comedies and Marvel movies.

Next up, she's making her first major foray into television, with Apple TV+

miniseries *Lady in the Lake*, which she stars in and produces with the production company she co-founded, MountainA. 'It was really tricky,' she says of juggling the acting and producing responsibilities, 'because it was a really complicated production. We had many challenges along the way, and so it was very much like "put on one hat, put on another hat".'

The show – adapted from the acclaimed novel by Laura Lippman – is largely set in 1960s Baltimore and follows the story of two women. Maddie (Portman) is a stifled Jewish housewife craving to return to work in investigative journalism, who finds herself following the story of two murders. One of those killed was Cleo Johnson (Moses Ingram, *The Queen's Gambit*, *Obi-Wan Kenobi*), a Black woman with political connections. Through the unfolding mystery (and Cleo's narration), these two women become inextricably entangled. Like much of Portman's work, it's intelligent, rich, and deals with numerous potent themes, including power dynamics through the prism of race, religion and gender.

Alma Har'el (*Honey Boy*) serves as the showrunner and director and leads the writing, too. '[Har'el] was just extraordinary in weathering all of the challenges, and just facing them, and making the best of everything, and just staying creative, and staying true to her vision,' beams Portman of her key collaborator.

It's rare to be able to have a career that begins in childhood ('Because most child labour is illegal!' laughs Portman), but it's been remarkable up to this point, and by the sounds of it, she has no plans to coast anytime soon...

***Lady in the Lake* is a fascinating show, with so many dimensions to it. Was there one particular thing that stood out to you as the main draw?**

Well, I was really excited to work with Alma Har'el. I was a big admirer of hers, and I connected with her immediately when we first met. And I was excited to explore a woman living in Baltimore at that time. My grandmother is from Baltimore, so I kind of imagined... my ancestors', my great-grandparents', and my grandmother's city was very exciting for me. And, of course, many of the themes that the show deals with are also interesting to me.

In 2020, you wore that amazing cape to the Oscars with the female directors' names stitched in it, and Alma's name was on there. How far does your connection go back with her?

Yes! That was so funny – that happened when we hadn't met yet. So when we met for the first time, she mentioned how she had seen that. It was like we had this kind of connection before we literally connected.

And how did you find it actually getting to know her, and work with her?

It was extraordinary. It was so inspiring, every day. She's so creative and so focused, and has such a vision, and is such a great leader. It's crazy to sustain that focus and creativity and positivity for so long. She was writing and directing every episode – writing with a team, but still leading that. It was just extraordinary to watch her, and to get to work with her.

This is the first big TV project for you, and Alma's first time showrunning. Did you feel like you were both adjusting to a new medium together?

It was nice, because we were also able to do it our own way, and find our own feet, as opposed to knowing how it's done. I think it was also nice coming from film that it felt like making just a very long film. And the biggest difference, I think, was the sustenance required to maintain that energy for so long.

Did you find that longer format challenging, or was it liberating to get that extended time with the character?

Well, it's very exciting to get to that level with the character and to have that space to explore a character. And, also, I loved working with Alma and her methods. She would allow things to get very improvisational. It really felt like we were doing Cassavetes sometimes. It was so exciting and fun and creative. But I think the



Portman as Queen Amidala in *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace*



Portman plays housewife-turned-investigative-journalist Maddie in the upcoming *Lady in the Lake*

biggest challenge was, again, to be working that much for that long. It was exhausting in a way that I've never felt before.

Did you feel that this book needed those seven hours of TV in order to do it justice?

Yes... Jean-Marc Vallée and his producing partner, Nathan Ross, brought [Alma and me] together. They kind of made the match around this book, and said, 'You two should do this together.'

When we read it, we said, 'We only want to do it if we could give Cleo as much space as she deserves, and we want her to be a fully fleshed-out character – as much as Maddie is.' Because in the book, it's much more from Maddie's point of view.

And so I think a series allows for you to really explore these two women's lives, and how they echo each other, and how they mirror each other, and how they intersect.

Cleo and Maddie's stories are entwined, but the nature of the story means you don't share much screen time with Moses Ingram...

Yeah. Actually, I was wishing that our characters interacted more because I think that Moses is one of the most extraordinary actresses of our time. She's just stunning. It's been lucky to get to watch her now in all the cuts. We did get to do some scenes together, which was still fun.

But, yes, mainly I shot all the stuff without her, and then we overlapped for

several weeks, and then she shot her stuff without me after. We had a few weeks together, which was glorious. And then I got to watch her stunning work after.

Did you talk about your Star Wars experiences at all, because it's interesting that both of your characters were closely connected to Ewan McGregor's Obi-Wan...

I know! No, we didn't talk about it, actually. That's funny. We talked about lots of other stuff. And we talked about Baltimore a lot because she grew up there. So that came up more often. But we didn't talk Star Wars.

On the Baltimore side of things, were there family documents from your grandmother that you could lean on for additional research?

Yes. It was funny because for my mom's birthday that year, I did a huge family tree thing, and found all this stuff about where my great-grandparents lived, and their immigration documents from Austria and Russia and Baltimore, and found their grave sites there.

It was really wild to imagine. And there were some Jewish delis and stuff that still exist from that time that are like 100 years old. It was wild to be walking the streets, kind of imagining them in those footsteps.

And then my grandmother, she moved to Cincinnati by the time she was Maddie's age, but was involved in very much the same kind of world there, which was a very

similar community at the time. And she was leading Jewish fundraisers and things like Maddie does.

So I had pictures of her in the 60s at that age in the newspaper – you know, president of the Jewish fundraising club in Cincinnati. There were a lot of photos that I'd be sending to Alma, being like, 'Oh my God! This is my grandma in the same year, in the same dress.'

You're an avid reader and have your book club [@natsbookclub]. So when you're reading, are you often thinking about characters you could potentially play, or stories you could adapt?

I try not to go into books with that intention because I want to enjoy the experience of a book without thinking of it like a means to an end, you know? [laughs] And I love to get lost in a great book. And also I feel that most books – most *great* books – operate best as books. There's something magical about the writing that transports you in a way that other media can't.

But, every once in a while, I will read something, and you feel that you can see it as you're reading it, or you feel that this is a character that you relate to in a different way. And, yes, in those instances, it's exciting to also adapt them.

You were someone who – from the outside, at least – seemed to make a very smooth transition from working as a child to your adult career. Is that how it felt on the inside?

I think I was very, very lucky. I think

'I WAS REALLY EXCITED TO WORK WITH ALMA HAR'EL'

➡ part of it was that I was never really in kid films. I was a child actor in grown-up movies. So it's like I kind of stayed making the same kind of movies consistently. I didn't have to be like, 'Oh, now I'm a cute kid in a TV show, and I have to change my image,' or something.

But, yeah, I felt very lucky to work... you know, obviously in 30 years, there's been moments where I'm like, 'I'm not getting the parts that I'm interested in!' But, you know, I've also learned that there are waves. It comes and goes, and comes back again.

Did you ever feel daunted in any of those early roles? As you say, they're grown-up films, and you worked with some big acting and directing names.

I wasn't aware enough. And, also, I was lucky in that everyone was very kind and, like, not scary. They made an effort to not intimidate me, you know? They immediately tried to put me at ease. There was no one I ever worked with who walked into a room and was like, 'I'm more important than you.'

Do you feel that your approach to acting has changed a great deal over the years, or are there things you've retained from the outset?

Yes, I do think that it changed a lot. I think the thing that stayed, which is so lucky, was the sense of play. I started, and it was fun for me, and I was playing, and I still feel like that now, which is so lucky. And I think that that sense that you go to work to have a good time, and enjoy the people that you're with – it's a lucky thing to have. I really didn't know anything. Obviously, I was 11 when I started, and, yeah, along the way, I picked things up, because it's scary every time when you're like, 'I don't have tools for this,' and you're just going by instinct. And then along the way, you see what other people are doing. You see how they prepare. You meet teachers who give you tools. And eventually you get a toolbox for yourself. There's always new tools. Alma introduced me to new things that I had never done before.

Have your criteria for choosing roles changed a lot over the years?

Well, I think that the people are obviously very important. The director that you're working with is the most important, and the other actors, of course. But I think that the main thing that's changed is that I specifically look for things that are not like my life now.

I don't know that I ever did things that were like my life, but I wasn't as conscious about it. And now I'm like, I love my life.



FIVE STAR TURNS

LEON 1994

Talk about a killer debut. Precocious Portman beat out 2,000 wannabes to the role of Mathilda, a 12-year-old orphan who becomes the protégé of Jean Reno's eponymous assassin. Trade bible *Variety* noted Portman's 'appealing spontaneity'.

CLOSER 2004

Portman scored her first Oscar nomination in Mike Nichols' adap of Patrick Marber's acclaimed play. Nichols protected her in the filming of the strip dance. 'He wants to see my bare ass [even] less than my father would,' she said.

BLACK SWAN 2010

Portman won the Oscar playing a ballerina who's pushed to breaking point, physically and mentally, when she plays the lead in *Swan Lake*. 'The quest for perfection,' as Portman put it, is something she understood well.

JACKIE 2016

Another role, another Oscar nomination, this time playing Jacqueline Kennedy in the wake of her husband's assassination. 'Her Jackie is scattered, tense, wrecked and defiant,' said *Time Out*. 'Portman is altogether astonishing,' gushed *The Guardian*.

MAY DECEMBER 2023

Julianne Moore and Charles Melton play the titular age-gap lovers in Todd Haynes' melodrama, but Portman's actor who preps for a role by shadowing the couple is essential to the film's high-wire tonal balancing act. **JG**



I love my kids and my friends. I don't want to go and pretend and be with other kids and friends [laughs]. I want to do something that's an experience that I wouldn't get to have normally, like exploring what my grandmother's existence was like, or, you know, playing a rock star or an astronaut or something that feels like, 'Oh, I'm getting to dip my toes into another existence.'

You studied at Harvard when your acting career was well under way. How important was it for you to take the time for that at that point in your life?

It was never really a question for me, and it was so important for me in... I mean, the main thing was that the friends I made there are my friends forever now. I don't know what my life would have been like without them so centrally in it. And it becomes kind of like your cocoon for life, to have friends like that.

And I think it also gave me a healthy relationship to my career that like... You don't have to cram it all in when you can. It's OK to take time to do things that you need for your life, then to go and work – it will be there. To be calm with [the idea] that it's important to prioritise [life] over work.

How do you look back on your whole Star Wars experience all these years later? Has your relationship with it changed much over the years?

I see it as an extraordinarily lucky thing to have been part of. I know how meaningful it is for people. And, every day, still, people are like, 'I just watched it with my kids.' To be part of something like that that's part of that cultural mythology, and part of people's childhoods, in such a vibrant way, is so, so lucky.

And, yeah, I think obviously with the reaction to them when they came out, being as harsh as it was – it was hard. And obviously, over time they've gained more appreciation, which has been nice, to always feel the balm of time. But, yeah, I feel very blessed to have been part of that, at that moment in my life.

Did the scale of it feel overwhelming when you first got involved, or did it go over your head somewhat?

I think I was both aware and also guarded from it by the fact that the internet was just kind of starting. It wasn't like it is now. There was no social media. There was a sense of it, but I still was leading a normal life. I was graduating high school. I was

having my normal existence with my friends, and applying to colleges. It wasn't the only thing in my life. I was able, luckily, to have all of that still – it didn't overwhelm my life. It was just exciting.

Are there particular roles for you that you look back on as turning points?

Oh, yeah. I did *The Seagull* in Central Park with Mike Nichols directing, right after the first Star Wars came out. And that was extraordinary. That was the most incredible cast. It was Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman and Christopher Walken and John Goodman. It was one person after the other that I admired. To get to see them all work up close, and to be in the rehearsal process, and then to do one of the best plays ever written together for free in Central Park – it was the dream of a lifetime.

And to get to work with Mike, who became such an important figure in my life, and then to do *Closer* with him a few years later... I think that was really what kind of got me, I guess, sort of my first steps into what we were talking about before, about building that toolbox, and how to do it.

And then, of course, *Black Swan* was really, really an incredible experience. I loved making it so much, and working with Darren was so incredible. And then Jackie, I think, also was a really amazing one to work on. I loved the experience of

making it. It was so special, and, again, it was a new challenge to play a well-known, real person, which was never something I thought I could do. It was honestly something I did because it logistically worked with my family life [laughs], and it turned into this unbelievable creative experience.

And then probably *May December* for being the first thing that we made with our production company [MountainA], and working with Todd [Haynes] and Julianne [Moore] and Charles [Melton], and to feel that we had a hand in helping that vision come to life, which was such an amazing thing.

You recently said that you've never reached the feeling of having 'made it'. Did winning an Oscar for *Black Swan* not give that feeling in a way?

It's such an intense experience because it's become such a marathon where there's just one thing after the other after the other, and you're in hair and make-up every single day, and in dresses and heels. I was pregnant. I kind of was like, 'What's happening?'

'I FEEL VERY BLESSED TO HAVE BEEN PART OF STAR WARS'

NATALIE PORTMAN IN NUMBERS

\$1.05BN

Box-office take of Portman's highest-grossing film, *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (excluding *Avengers: Endgame's* cameo)

71

Acting credits to date

3

Academy Award nominations – and one win

23

Years old when she received her first Oscar nom

2

Episodes of *The Simpsons* Portman has appeared in



➡ I feel like I was just completely disoriented, you know? I didn't know up from down. So it's hard to even say... [laughs] Now I look back on it, I'm like, 'Oh my God, that was so amazing.' But when I was in it, I was in a fog. It just felt like: 'Where do I have to go next?'

It's a shame. I wish they would slow it down a little bit somehow, and take it down a notch. I was like, 'You know, if I could just roll out of bed, and put on my T-shirt and jeans, and do this stuff – I would probably be able to take in the environment a little bit more.'

You mentioned *Jackie*, and the idea of playing real people is explored in *May December*. Did that change the way you think about playing real-life figures?

Yeah. I think there is a certain vampiric quality where you are using someone's life as your material, and you have to be thoughtful and sensitive about it while also attacking the material. You want to go at it with your entire self, but you also want to consider the effect it might have

'PEOPLE WILL DISCOVER THE THINGS THAT ARE BEAUTIFUL'

if, of course, the person is alive. That's a whole different thing as well.

You talked about not wanting to play characters who are like you – does it help when you have accents and costumes you can lean into?

I think it's always helpful to have these markers of what's different from you. It immediately makes it someone who's not you when you have an accent, or when you're dressed differently. Those things are helpful. It's the hardest, actually, when you don't have that to hide behind.

You've directed one feature, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. What did you take away from that, and can you see yourself directing again?

I loved it so much. I thought it was really one of the most moving experiences of my life to have a group of people helping me make what I saw in my head become real. I would love to do it again, and, yeah, I hope to.

Were there any lessons you've learned from any of the greats you've worked with that you tried to apply?

GETTY IMAGES

Oh, I learn something all the time from everyone I work with. I've learned so many things from directors I've worked with, and the ways they talk to actors, and the way they frame, and the types of camera they use. It's very lucky, I think, as an actor, that you get to observe so many sets. I always think about first-time directors who have never been on a set before, and I think, 'Wow, they must be very brave to do that, when they're there on their first day.'

In terms of the projects you've produced recently, like *Lady in the Lake*, *Vox Lux* and *May December*, these are all morally complex stories. Do they require you to get involved on that level to get them made?

Yeah, they're hard to get made, and are getting harder. But they're also the most interesting ones to make, and it's exciting when they find their audiences. They're very rewarding.

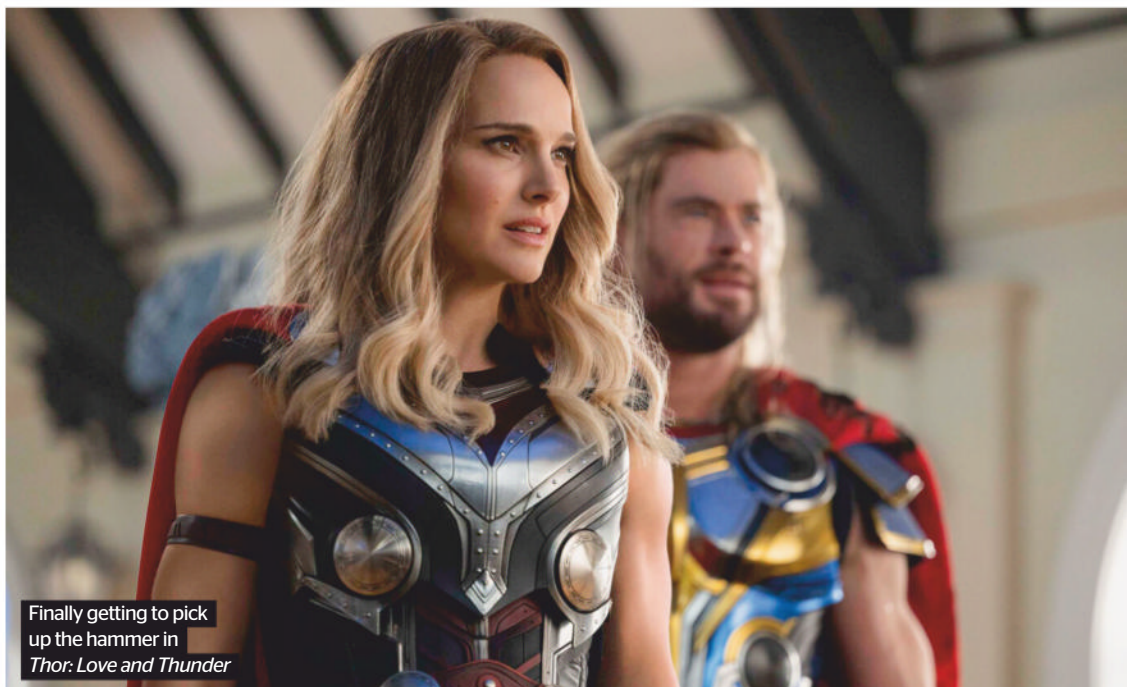
Looking back, are you glad you got the chance to return to Jane Foster and become the Mighty Thor?

Yeah, it was so fun. I had such a great time making it. I loved working with Taika [Waititi], and Chris [Hemsworth] is just the greatest, and so is Tessa [Thompson]. I was just laughing all day, every day. There's only my highest love for that experience – and not to mention Australia, which is just the most glorious country.

Is the comedy a very different challenge to the dramatic side of acting?

I love it. It is very different. But I love the kind of improvisational spirit that you can take back and forth between the two. Like what we were doing on *Thor: Love and Thunder* was actually quite similar to what we were doing on *Lady in the Lake*. You just take something and riff on it. And when you have a willing partner and a great leader, you can really just go for it.

Could you ever see yourself returning to Jane, or did you consider *Love*



and *Thunder* to be your farewell to that character?

Oh, I have no idea. I mean, no one's asked me to. So I don't know. But sure, that was super-fun.

Star Wars and the Marvel Cinematic Universe are two things that have massively obsessive fans, but what for you would be the things that you yourself would geek out about?

I'm a real book nerd. When I get to meet writers, and talk to writers that I love, I geek out.

Are there any of your own films that you wish had been seen more widely, or weren't received as you'd hoped?

Anywhere but Here is an early one I made that I've always wished was more... Like, I felt it was a great film, and it didn't get the legs that I had hoped. *Vox Lux* didn't get in cinemas as much as I had hoped, but then afterwards I feel like so many people have found it later – that's generally been my experience with things that are good that don't necessarily open big or whatever. They usually find their people later.

Do you take it to heart if a film doesn't open to expectations?

No. I mean, that's the beauty of the accessibility of films now, online. I do feel like people will discover the things that are beautiful in their time. Obviously, I just hope, always, for the opportunity to keep making films. That's the only thing – I'm like, 'Oh, I hope they let me make another one.'

Looking ahead, what can we expect from the upcoming Guy Ritchie movie *Fountain of Youth*, in which you star alongside John Krasinski?

It's like an action-comedy-adventure extravaganza, and it's been super, super fun to shoot.

This is very morbid, but *Lady in the Lake* explores the idea of attending your own funeral. If you were in charge of your own In Memoriam clips, is there anything you would particularly like to see in there?

Oh, shit, that is very morbid [laughs]. I don't know. I don't really expect to be remembered except for the people who love me, so... [laughs] My friends and family can remember me laughing over a glass of wine at night.

LADY IN THE LAKE IS STREAMING NOW ON APPLE TV+.

NATALIE PORTMAN LINE READING

'IS LIFE ALWAYS THIS HARD, OR IS IT JUST WHEN YOU'RE A KID?'

MATHILDA
LEON

'If you can't laugh at yourself, life is going to seem a whole lot longer than you'd like.'

SAM
GARDEN STATE

'EAT MY HAMMER!'

JANE FOSTER
THOR: LOVE AND THUNDER



GETTY

THE DEAD DON'T HURT

STRAIGHT SHOOTER

Viggo Mortensen is riding high with ***The Dead Don't Hurt***, a revisionist western that sees him write, direct, produce, score and star alongside an awards-worthy Vicky Krieps. *Total Film* saddles up with the no-nonsense multi-hyphenate to discuss how he wipes the dust off the Old West to focus on women, immigrants and a tender love story...

WORDS: JAMIE GRAHAM

Viggo Mortensen is in good spirits. Last night, his second film as director, *The Dead Don't Hurt*, played to a standing ovation at the Glasgow Film Festival, and today the 65-year-old star, always a calm, modest man, admits to being 'very happy with the reception'. His back is turned as he walks around his hotel suite twiddling at the window blinds to moderate the sun, but his smile can be heard in his voice. Another twiddle. When he finally sits down to face *Total Film*, his handsome features are dramatically swathed in shadow.

'I actually wasn't trying to reinvent the western; I wanted to be respectful of something that I admire, which is the well-made, classic western,' he explains of the revisionist *The Dead Don't Hurt*. Set in an 1860s frontier community in Nevada, the understated story focuses on the burgeoning romantic relationship between two immigrants, the fiercely independent French-Canadian Vivienne Le Coudy, played by Vicky Krieps, and Danish carpenter Holger, played by Mortensen himself. 'But I grant you,' he continues, 'the one subversive or unusual thing is that, yes, it has a female character at the centre, and a love story is central to what the movie is about.' He muses. 'I guess, most importantly, when Vivienne's male companion goes away [to fight in the Civil War], we don't see him for quite some time. We stay with her, which is completely unusual for a classic western.'

It's unusual for modern westerns, too. 'I mean, even [in] newer westerns, whether they be *The Hateful Eight* or *The Power of the Dog*, female characters are secondary,' he says. 'They're not really fleshed-out. It is very unusual, for some reason, even in our times, to have it be about the women. I would say that Kelly Reichardt [*Meek's Cutoff*, *First Cow*] is more attentive to women than these other guys.'

'I'VE ALWAYS LIKED TO BE AROUND SETS EVEN ON THE DAYS I'M NOT WORKING, JUST TO SEE WHAT THEY'RE DOING'

VIGGO MORTENSEN

Mortensen didn't cynically set out to make a feminist western as a point of difference, but instead started writing a tale about a girl, which he organically followed to discover who she became as a woman. It was a novelistic approach, inspired by some of the storytelling in modern-day TV series, which enjoy the luxury of allowing stories to unfold in unforced and often non-linear style to better explore the characters. And so he arrived at a woman of modest means who refuses to let her status or sex reduce her, and who is unbroken by the terrible events that befall her in the movie. It was crucial that Mortensen now find the right person to play Vivienne.

Enter Luxembourg-born actor Vicky Krieps, who Paul Thomas Anderson cast in *Phantom Thread* because she neither shrank nor dropped her eye when she first met acting legend Daniel Day-Lewis, but greeted him as an equal.

'Yeah, I can believe that,' says Mortensen, the shadows shifting as the corners of his mouth curl upwards. 'She really has a strong sense of herself, like the character she plays. She's a free human being in that she thinks for herself and is self-sufficient. Once she commits to something in terms of acting... Even if it's not the perfect take, it's never false. I can't imagine anyone doing what she did with it, really, and believably playing someone where I look at the screen and I see every detail. She's completely a woman



Atlas Green plays young son Vincent in his feature debut



from that time, and I believe her 100% in what she's going through, and every second of her performance.'

GO WEST

Born in New York City to a Danish father and American mother, Mortensen was raised in Venezuela and Argentina, where his father managed ranches. His parents divorced when he was 11, his mother taking him and his two younger brothers back to the state of New York. The peripatetic lifestyle didn't stop there. Upon graduating St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, he moved to Denmark and wrote short stories and poetry while working odd jobs, and then upped sticks to again return to New York, this time tending tables and bars while taking acting lessons. Next stop, Los Angeles.

Mortensen's film debut was a small part as an Amish farmer in Peter Weir's sombre thriller *Witness* (1985), and gigs of varying sizes followed in movies as diverse as *Leatherface: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre III*, *Carlito's Way*, *Crimson Tide*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *G.I. Jane* and *Gus*



Vicky Krieps is the independent Vivienne Le Coudy



Viggo Mortensen plays carpenter Holger, a Danish immigrant

Van Sant's *Psycho* remake. Then, in 1999, he was approached to play royal ranger Aragorn in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, a role he took primarily because his son, a fan of J.R.R. Tolkien's source books, urged him to. Mortensen was crowned with stardom.

But stardom was never his desire. Swiftly he turned down a chance to be in *The Hobbit* movies ('One of the producers did ask if I would be interested,' he explained in 2013. 'I said, "You do know, don't you, that Aragorn isn't in *The Hobbit*? That there is a 60-year gap between the books?"'), and his work since – films like *The Road*, *Captain Fantastic* and *Green Book*, plus David Cronenberg movies *A History of Violence*, *Eastern Promises* and *Crimes of the Future* – has consciously repositioned him as a character actor. Meanwhile, international productions *Everybody Has a Plan*, *Jauja*, *Far from Men* and *Eureka* have evidenced an experimental yen.

There was, however, one constant during his journeying through this varied body of work: he was never satisfied with simply being an actor. 'From the beginning, I've been interested in the storytelling aspect, and hence the collective enterprise,' he points out. 'I've always liked to be around sets even on the

days I'm not working, just to see what they're doing. My film school has been film shoots.'

Mortensen made his writer/director debut with 2020's *Falling*, an affecting drama about the relationship between a cantankerous, aged father (Lance Henriksen) suffering from dementia and his gay middle-aged son (Mortensen). It was a deeply personal work, Mortensen having lost his own dad to dementia.

'For better or worse, I want to make a movie that I'd like to go see,' he says of ensuring that the subject matter chimes. 'When the director is not allowed to make the movie they want to make, it's never as good as it might have been. Or as interesting, or as original, in any case. I could not think, "OK, I want to meet all the demographics. I want to please everyone. I'll put in voiceover. I'll put in, 'San Francisco, 1869.' I'll make sure everybody understands every single bit, and it'll appeal to every racial, sexual profile of an audience.'" I understand when huge-budget movies do that, because there's a lot at stake, investment-wise, but it's not a recipe for making memorable, original movies.'

OLD SCHOOL

Mortensen has learned this from the filmmakers he has worked with over the years, along with how to stay calm and best communicate with cast and crew. Cronenberg, Jane Campion and Ron Howard are names he cites. When asked what he learned from Jackson on *Lord of the Rings*, he says: 'Problem-solving. It was like a giant, mobile film school. It was fantastic to be able to run over to one soundstage as they built Rivendell, sculpting, painting, adding trees, or to drop by Helm's Deep. And just seeing Peter Jackson solve logistical filmmaking problems on the fly, out in nature, depending on the weather...' He ponders. 'And inspiring a large number of people. The crew was large and mostly Kiwis, and not all of them that experienced. But they learned. It was film school for everyone. I don't know how he did it. It was one man commanding this giant, floating circus.'

Mortensen not only wrote, directed and starred in *The Dead Don't Hurt*, but also produced and composed the strikingly plaintive score. It's some achievement, though he's quick to point out that plenty of suggestions from many other skilled people helped him to fashion the film. That he encouraged all voices is fitting given one of the key themes in *The Dead Don't Hurt*.

'People came from lots of places,' says Mortensen, pointing out how the town in his movie is a melting pot of ethnicities, while many classic westerns focus on white cowboys. 'You know, 12 or 13 years earlier, that part of the country was Mexico. In 1848, the United States took basically a third of Mexico away. So the population is a mix of Anglos and the Latino population.'

Right now, Mortensen points out, there is huge division in not just the United States and the UK, but in Spain, France, Hungary, Poland... 'It's everywhere. It's not really a national thing, it's a human thing. It's the fear of the other. And the political use or incitement of the fear of the other, to get power, and keep it, and control populations.' So while he didn't write *The Dead Don't Hurt* 'to make a comment about now', he's pleased that it resonates. 'It's unrealistic what the extreme right tries to do in France or Britain or the US or even in Canada. "England for the English" – what the hell does that mean?'

Mortensen is a man with plenty to say, and with many stories to tell. 'I just hope,' he says, again pushing back the shadows with his thoughtful smile, 'that enough people go see this one so that those who have the money will trust me with another new story.'

THE DEAD DON'T HURT IS OUT NOW.



The couple's lives are complicated when Holger leaves to fight in the Civil War

Marty & me



Thelma Schoonmaker has edited every Martin Scorsese movie since 1980's *Raging Bull*. The three-time Oscar winner tells *Total Film* all about their legendary relationship, and why movies like *GoodFellas*, *The Departed* and *Killers of the Flower Moon* are a cut above...

WORDS JAMIE GRAHAM

What, exactly, does a film editor do? Ask the average person on the street to, ahem, assemble an answer, and they're likely to struggle. While filmmaking is the blending together of several established art forms – literature (script), painting and photography (cinematography), music (score) and theatre (acting, production design, costume) – the art of cutting is unique to cinema.

'It's mysterious,' nods Thelma Schoonmaker, who is perhaps the only editor who's not also a director that the average person on the street might have heard of. Her work with filmmaker Martin Scorsese, and the eight Oscar nominations that it's garnered, have made her something of a legend. 'I must say it's hard [to explain it]. You start one way, and everything is long, then you screen to friends, discuss. We do many screenings, many rough cuts. You'd have to be there to see why things are changing because they change gradually. But basically, what I say is, "Look, they shoot the film, then I get it. They might shoot a wide shot, a medium shot and a close-up, and one of my jobs is: should we be on a wide shot, medium or a close-up for this line?"'

Editing is not simply about taking a four-hour cut of a film and chiselling it down to an audience-friendly two hours. It's about providing the visual language of the movie and the punctuation; style and rhythm. This, in turn, contributes significantly to the tone and emotion of the picture. Naturally, then, it's something that Schoonmaker and Scorsese do together.

'Completely,' Schoonmaker smiles, her lunchtime sandwich sitting on the table before her at the British Film Institute. It's October:

the BFI's Cinema Unbound season, dedicated to the films of Schoonmaker's late husband, Michael Powell, and his creative partner, Emeric Pressburger, will be bringing the glories of *A Matter of Life and Death*, *Black Narcissus*, *The Red Shoes* and many more to the BFI Southbank and cinemas UK-wide for the next two-and-a-half months. What's more, Schoonmaker and Scorsese, via The Film Foundation in conjunction with the BFI National Archive and StudioCanal, have overseen a 4K restoration of Powell's seminal 1960 serial-killer movie, *Peeping Tom*.

But back to cutting with Marty. 'Everyone thinks I'm doing the editing, but we do it all together,' she explains. 'He's a great editor and he taught me everything I know. I get way too much credit. I really do. It's upsetting. He loves editing – it's his favourite part of

University to study political science and Russian language. She graduated in 1961.

It was while attending a graduate course on primitive art at Columbia University that she spotted an advertisement in *The New York Times* to train as an assistant editor. The life-changing meet with a young Scorsese, meanwhile, came when she attended a six-week course in filmmaking at New York University, and used her editing skills to help salvage his short film *What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?* after a previous editor had butchered the negative. Schoonmaker would go on to cut Scorsese's 1967 feature debut, *Who's That Knocking at My Door*, and together they, and four others, worked on the edit of 1970 music epic *Woodstock* – the first documentary to receive a Best Film Editing Oscar nomination, which went to Schoonmaker alone.

A union dispute with the Motion Picture Editors Guild prevented Schoonmaker from cutting movies in the 1970s (though she made an uncredited contribution to Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*), but from *Raging Bull* on, it's been all systems go. Of course, it didn't hurt that the no-punches-pulled editing of Scorsese's Jake LaMotta boxing biopic won the Oscar in 1981.

'I couldn't believe Marty didn't win that night,' says Schoonmaker, referring both to the fact that they cut the picture together, with Scorsese acting as mentor, and also that the film lost out to Robert Redford's *Ordinary People* in the Best Picture and Best Director categories. 'It was one of the saddest nights of my life. I just couldn't believe it. I wanted to give him my Oscar. I learned so much on *Raging Bull*. Marty was teaching me constantly. And the brilliant camerawork, the changing of speeds, the cutting... it's just phenomenal.'

Raging Bull failed at the box office, and while it received eight Oscar nominations (winning

'We share the editing, and I love that. I think he feels he can trust me to do what's right for the movie'

filmmaking. We share it, and I love that. He had very bad experiences with editors in Hollywood. They were just not willing...' She sighs. 'Ego battles. I think he feels he can trust me to do what's right for the movie.'

THE SPLICE OF LIFE

Born in January 1940 to American parents in Algiers, Algeria, Schoonmaker was evacuated with her family after the fall of France in World War Two. Her childhood was spent mainly on the Dutch-Caribbean island of Aruba, with time in Portugal, and she settled in America in 1955, attending Cornell



Big hitter: Robert De Niro in Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980)

two) and various awards from critics' bodies, Schoonmaker insists that it wasn't truly appreciated for another 10 years, when it became a contender in Best Movie of All Time polls. It's a pattern she's since seen repeated again and again, with appreciation being in particularly short supply from the film studios.

'It happened continuously with Marty's movies,' she stresses. 'It's only the last 10 years or so that he's been acknowledged as the great director he is. Believe me, we had to fight tooth and nail [on] every one of those films to keep it being changed by the studio. And Marty would burn the film rather than give it up. We would win, but it would be a long, hard battle. Marty really struggled being a ground-breaker. I mean, *Mean Streets* was such a stunning change in so many ways. But being a ground-breaker in Hollywood was really, really hard for him. He had a terrible time.'

EDITED HIGHLIGHTS

What's remarkable is how Scorsese and Schoonmaker, at the ages of 81 and 84

'Editing *GoodFellas* was like a horse I was riding. It knew where it was going'



Schoonmaker receives her award for *Raging Bull* at the 1981 Oscars

respectively, have both kept their fire. Most filmmakers lose their mojo in the twilight years of their career, or burn out altogether, perhaps because there are only so many fights you can survive. And yet Scorsese and Schoonmaker just keep on keeping on, their astonishing list of credits including *The King of Comedy*, *After Hours*, *The Color of Money*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *GoodFellas*, *Cape Fear*, *Casino*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Aviator*, *The Departed*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, *Silence* and *The Irishman*. Schoonmaker points out that part of the secret is that they never repeat

themselves, saying, 'Each one is a wonderful new challenge. *Killers [of the Flower Moon]* was very challenging. It's very unusual. We didn't underestimate the audience.'

She also points out that they like to push boundaries. The pyrotechnic style of *GoodFellas*, for example, was Scorsese's response to the rise of the generation of MTV directors. '*GoodFellas* is so entertaining,' she gasps. 'Every scene! [Nicholas] Pileggi had written the book, *Wiseguy*, and Marty knew so much about the Mafia that it was a great meeting of minds. That script was... phew! We didn't have to change anything. It was there.' When it came to editing the footage, 'It was like a horse I was riding. It knew where it was going.'

Schoonmaker's explosive cutting was Oscar nominated and, in 2012, *GoodFellas* was rated the 15th best-edited movie of all time by the Motion Picture Editors Guild – *Raging Bull* was No 1. She's proud of the accolades but adds, 'I do notice that the things I've gotten nominations for tend to be more active... action. Like *Raging Bull*, *The Departed*. Things like *Silence* are not...' She trails off. 'I do think there are certain characteristics of movies that win Oscars.'

But what about surviving those battles with the suits? How do they do it? 'You can get worn down,' she attests. 'Marty has a way of dealing with studio people that is very good. He doesn't get angry with them – Michael [Powell] would, he'd get angry and storm out the room – but Marty never does that. He finds a way to try and open the mind, if possible, by saying things like, "That's a good idea,

but I couldn't make that movie." In a nice way so no one gets insulted. He's very skilful at that. Michael wasn't, because, I think, of that long, wonderful period with Rank when no one paid any attention and they made masterpiece after masterpiece.'

It all changed for Powell with the release of *Peeping Tom*, about a young man, a focus puller at a British film studio, who films women as he kills them with a blade on the end of his camera's tripod. Critics labelled it 'sick' and 'beastly', most likely because they left the theatre feeling so uncomfortable: *Peeping Tom* implicates the viewer in the killer's voyeurism, and elicits audience sympathy for the monster by showing how he was tormented as a child by his psychologist father who specialised in the subject of fear. The film was yanked from theatres. And Powell, one of the greatest filmmakers, found his career effectively terminated.

Scorsese was one of the key figures behind *Peeping Tom*'s re-release in 1980, which began its reappraisal. Today it's rightly regarded as a masterpiece, and a fascinating companion piece to Hitchcock's *Psycho*: both released in 1960, they birthed the modern horror movie. It was also Scorsese who introduced Schoonmaker to Powell. They married in 1984; Powell died in 1990, aged 84.

'When Michael met Marty for the first time, he said, "It's a miracle! This man knows every movie I ever made and wants to know how did



Lily Gladstone and Leonardo DiCaprio in 2023's *Killers of the Flower Moon*

I do every shot?"' beams Schoonmaker. 'He was thrilled. He had a very happy end of his life.'

Powell spent 30 frustrating years trying to find funding for the many movie ideas he had after *Peeping Tom*. How he'd delight to see that the pilloried film now has a gorgeous 4K restoration, its scratches erased and its lurid hues revived. To oversee the restoration, Scorsese and Schoonmaker were required to watch the film again and again until they knew every line.

'Marty kept shouting, "LOOK AT THE FILMMAKING!"' says Schoonmaker. It's no surprise, really – Scorsese has before gone on record saying you can learn everything there is to know about filmmaking from Fellini's *8½* and *Peeping Tom*. Schoonmaker immediately

points out a key overlap between her late husband's movie and Scorsese's pictures: 'It's so stunning the way you feel for this man who's been tortured by his father and can't help what he's doing. Because Scorsese investigates that same area – they're never heroes or villains in his movies, they're something in between.'

She at last reaches for her sandwich and offers a final thought on Marty. 'We're more collaborators now than we were then. I was learning for a long time. So he gave me the best job in the world and the best husband in the world.'

PEEPING TOM IS NOW AVAILABLE ON SPECIAL EDITION 4K UHD, BLU-RAY AND DVD.



Karlheinz Böhm and Anna Massey in Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, 1960

JACK — MY LIFE IN PICTURES — BLACK

Over the years he's made us laugh as rockers, animated critters and videogame avatars. As he prepares to go full Dragon Warrior again in the fourth Kung Fu Panda movie, **JACK BLACK** riffs on some of his biggest hits with *Total Film*.

WORDS KIM TAYLOR-FOSTER

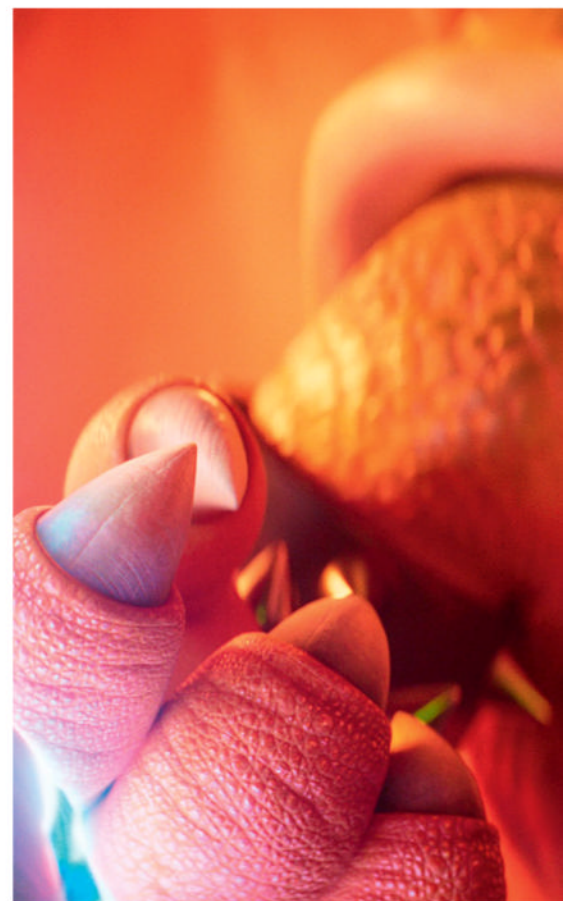
PORTRAIT CHRIS FLOYD



KUNG FU PANDA 4 (2024)

The DreamWorks franchise that began in 2008 gifted Black with one of his most enduring roles: kindly, kickass, black-and-white bear, Po.

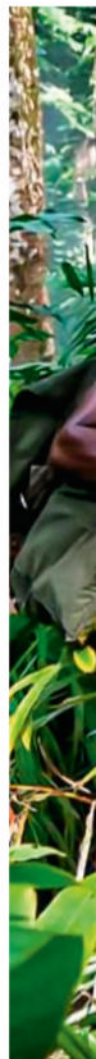
'I love kung-fu cinema so this is the only real opportunity to explore that world for me. I've just had a blast. When I first got the offer, [former DreamWorks CEO] Jeffrey Katzenberg liked what I did in *School of Rock* and was like, "I just did *Shrek*, and things are kickin' ass, and I think you'd be great as this panda." At first, I was hesitant. I was like, "I don't know if I quite understand what the concept is." He showed me a rough drawing of Po animated to a scene from *High Fidelity*. I got it in that moment. I was like, "Yeah, let's do it." And it's been an incredible bucking bronco ride ever since. I guess it's just that combination that people love; they love martial arts and when you can mix comedy with that, it has that combustible sort of combination. Jackie Chan was able to do it really well for dozens of films. Stephen Chow did that to great effect with *Kung Fu Hustle* and *Shaolin Soccer*. I think it's the same kind of thing that resonates with a *Kung Fu Panda* audience. Do I want to do any more? It's not up to me. I could see them going, "Oh, now there's a bunch of baby pandas. It's *Kung Fu Pandaz* – with a 'Z'." But I'm always down to clown. You know I'm ready to party.'



JUMANJI: WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE (2017)

Another videogame-flavoured franchise offered Black hilarious body-swap potential, playing a videogame avatar inhabited by a teen girl.

'We were shooting one scene in the Hawaiian underbrush and there were these centipedes. They're terrifying insects. These guys play for blood. Take a look at a close-up of a centipede's face. It looks like Satan. We were working late into the night and everyone was on edge about these centipedes. Then we heard someone on the crew yell out in pain. He was bitten by a goddamn centipede. But we had a lot of fun when we weren't running away from centipedes. Do you know who I hung out with the most when we weren't filming? Karen Gillan and Nick Jonas. We were the Three Musketeers. I didn't feel trepidation about the Robin Williams of it all. This felt like a very different direction. I didn't think anyone was gonna say, "Hey, how dare you touch that?" I was just psyched to hit the ground running on this insane jungle adventure inside of a game with my old pal, [director/producer] Jake Kasdan. We'd had so much fun on *Orange County*. Sometimes you hear about the cast, and you read the script and you go, "This just feels like it's gonna be dynamite.'"





THE SUPER MARIO BROS. MOVIE (2023)

Black voiced videogame reptilian baddie Bowser in the highest-grossing film of last year.

'I was very excited to play Bowser. It was a fun opportunity to play a villain. They're some of the coolest, juiciest roles – that I don't usually get to play. We really drilled down – that's pro talk for spending weeks and weeks experimenting with different voices – until the powers that be felt like we landed on something that was perfect. [Illumination founder] Chris Meledandri has a very keen eye for detail. And that was tough, to be honest. It was like, "Oh, man, they're not just gonna let me do whatever I want." When we did finally get to a place where everyone agreed, then it was off to the races. But we could have gone a few different ways. I was experimenting with a few different accents. There was a British guy in there. There was a Deep Southern guy in there. We landed on the final Bowser that's a little pinch of heavy metal God of Rock; a little pinch of professional wrestler; and a little pinch of fire-breathing dragon. They screened it for me a month before it hit theatres. I was like, "We've got a hit on our hands." I'm laughing and smiling the whole way through this movie. And then it came out and it got horrible reviews. I was like, "What movie did they see?" Luckily, the world didn't listen to Rotten Tomatoes, and it was one of the biggest hits of all time. It's a totally different experience to [upcoming videogame movie] *Minecraft*. They're both videogame related but in terms of approach, live action is a different ball of wax. I'm really excited to get back into the creative space with Jared Hess, the director. We worked together on *Nacho Libre* years ago. It's been fun jamming with Jared.'





TROPIC THUNDER (2008)

Alongside 'Frat Pack' stablemate Ben Stiller, Black went meta as a comedy actor working on a Vietnam movie that turns dangerous.

'The scenario was so outlandish and hilarious – this group of actors acting like soldiers and getting caught up in an actual super-dangerous military emergency – it was a no-brainer. Hard, though. Once again, we were in the terrifying jungles of Hawaii. Just hours of four-wheeling it to get to these difficult locations. But it was worth the mudslides, treacherous terrains and devilish centipedes. It was an incredible ensemble. Ben Stiller, who's a genius, and Robert Downey Jr., Tom Cruise, Matthew McConaughey... a veritable who's who of Hollywood. Tom Cruise was unrecognisable as Les Grossman. He was really channelling some angst, I think, about some studio executives that shall remain nameless. I just didn't know he had that gear in him. I guess he had done some comedy but not like this, with such broad strokes. And not such a character that he totally disappeared into. It does make you wonder when he is going to bust out and do some more comedy. If he does, he should let me know. I'll jump on board that choo-choo train.'

TENACIOUS D IN THE PICK OF DESTINY (2006)

The fictional fantasy origin story for Black and Kyle Gass' real-life rock duo.

'My baby. The only one that I wrote. The challenge was figuring out how to take the magic of our live act, our little comedy rock'n'roll fever dream, and create a narrative that could be brought to the silver screen. We took years just thinking, "What's it going to be?" We went through different writers, scenarios and stories, and nothing felt right. And then I realised: let's just tell the true story of our origins. We'll spruce it up, but at the core is an emotional truth. Even though when it first came out it was a box-office disaster, it ended up still being our proudest moment and the pinnacle of our creativity. Over the years, it's become a hit and it's actually made all its money back. You can tell the extent of this because when we perform all around the world, everyone knows every word of every song in that movie.'





KING KONG (2005)

In Peter Jackson's epic remake, Black is the filmmaker out to make a monster movie on Skull Island.

'The Lord of the Rings was my favourite trilogy of all time. I worshipped Peter Jackson, and [collaborators] Fran [Walsh] and Philippa [Boyens]. When I got the call to be in *King Kong*, I just accepted. Before I read the script. The character itself, the filmmaker, is based on the 1933 film. There's nothing *School of Rock*-y about it. They just liked my performance in *School of Rock*. They liked my charisma, my flavours, and they thought that could be an exciting element to put into this story. They saw me in this world and I'm glad they did because it was one of the highlights of my life. When you're working with Peter Jackson and he's got something in his mind, I imagine it's kind of like Elon Musk when Elon's like, "I'm going to send a thousand satellites into space." No one's going to stop him and Peter was riding a wave of that kind of momentum off of *The Lord of the Rings*. He was like, "OK, so you guys fall down this treacherous ravine; now you're surrounded by flesh-eating insects and they're coming to eat you, so you have to defend yourself and swipe around like mad. And we're not going to have anything here now; you're just going to have to imagine it." No one would do it this way because it's just so expensive – where there's literally thousands of moving insects that they're going to have to do in post.'



SCHOOL OF ROCK (2003)

In the first of three collaborations with Richard Linklater, Black found a signature role as rocker-turned-reluctant-substitute teacher Dewey Finn.

'A lot of scenes in that movie are embedded in my mind forever. There was a day where I sang to the students and Rick Linklater, the director, was like, "I want to get this all in one take." There's something about that independent film spirit that he brought to the movie that made it special. You don't see a shot like that, where you shoot a whole scene with one take, with no coverage, no over-the-shoulder shots. Just a slow pull back on me just singing this one song from beginning to end. It felt like this is the [role] that's going to be on my tombstone. It was made for me – Mike White wrote that with me in mind. There's something different that happens when a really good writer crafts a character for you. It's bespoke; it fits you in a way that other projects don't. Mike also co-wrote *Nacho Libre*. I don't know why there has never been a *Nacho Libre* sequel but there's something great about a project when it is just a one and only. The one-offs.'



UNIVERSAL/DREAMWORKS FOR KING FU PANDA; ALAMY



HIGH FIDELITY (2000)

After regular TV and film work, Black broke out with a scene-stealing supporting turn in Stephen Frears' Nick Hornby adaptation.

'My friend, John Cusack, was like, "You would be perfect for this role, Barry, in *High Fidelity*." I was hesitant because I was like, I don't know if I want to make a movie about rock and roll, and someone who is a critic of rock and roll. I think it might hurt my rock and roll career. So, at first I passed and my agent said, "Are you fucking kidding me? Are you insane?" I was like, "You're right. I'm insane." It's Stephen Frears, for Christ's sake, who was one of my favourite directors. When it came time to finally sing at the end of the movie, I was like, "Holy shit, that's a lot of pressure." We did the first take and the vibe in the room was not electric. It wasn't the big grand finale it needed to be. [Frears] came out, livid. He was yelling at the entire room [adopts British accent]: "Everyone here has to be engaged in the performance. The music is blowing your mind. Now let's take it from the top and this time, you enjoy yourselves. OK, Jack, take it from the top. Jolly good." I was like, "Holy shit, he really was yelling at me." I took it as my fault they're not enjoying it, because I'm not rocking hard enough. He said, "Action" on take two, and I just uncorked it. And that was the take that they used in the movie. Thank God I was able to reach a reservoir. That was a big money ball for me.'

KUNG FU PANDA 4 IS OUT NOW ON BLU-RAY, DVD AND DIGITAL.



HOW TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY ... ACCORDING TO DIABLO CODY

She's a screenwriting superstar who rocketed to fame on her very first project when she won an Oscar for *Juno*. Diablo Cody's latest film, *Lisa Frankenstein*, also features signatures like zeitgeisty dialogue, larger-than-life characters and an irresistible concept, and now she's breaking down her process for *Total Film*.

WORDS MATT MAYTUM

I love the process of being able to write something, and watch it magically become a film,' beams Diablo Cody. 'Writing is instant gratification. If I want to write a scene in a blizzard, I can do that in 15 minutes. Setting up that blizzard [on a film set], it's like, "Guys, this is crazy. Are we sure this is worth it?"' she laughs.

Chatting to Diablo Cody – the Academy Award-winning screenwriter behind *Juno*, *Jennifer's Body*, *Young Adult*, *Ricky and the Flash* and *Tully* – is as funny, refreshing and illuminating as watching a film based on one of her scripts. It's December 2023, and she's talking *Total Film* through her writing methodology ahead of the release of her latest project, *Lisa Frankenstein*. Directed by first-time filmmaker Zelda Williams, it's like an 80s teen romcom, only here the romance is between a girl (Kathryn Newton) and a reanimated corpse (Cole Sprouse). With a knack for witty phrasing ('If I'm working on a project, and I'm being paid to do it, as far as I'm concerned, they're renting my brain, and they may use it however they care to'), Cody is also self-deprecating and down to earth, which you might not expect from someone who bagged an Oscar and BAFTA for their first ever screenwriting gig.

Having also worked in TV and on Broadway, Cody had been itching to write another feature. 'I admit, I was thinking to myself, "You've got to write another feature. It's been too long,"' she says of *Lisa Frankenstein*. 'But it felt organic. It usually does. I can't force myself to write anything, sadly.' Here, she tells *TF* her no-nonsense advice for how she puts together a screenplay...



ON THE OUTLINE

‘Typically I have a very standard process, and it has evolved over the years, mainly due to the constraints of the industry. I am not naturally inclined to outline a screenplay before I write it, but the majority of the studio jobs that I take require an outline, because they want to know what they’re paying for. And I have to say, I do think those suits might be on to something, because it is actually a really helpful step. Having your story beats in front of you, you are going to have a better script. Just do it.’

‘*Lisa Frankenstein* was a very different process. I might even say it was unprecedented. I wrote that screenplay in March and April of 2020. I was in a really strange headspace. We weren’t going anywhere at that point [due to COVID-19]. I think everyone was teetering on the brink of sanity. I didn’t even know if we were living through the apocalypse, so I certainly wasn’t writing with any commercial mindset. I was just writing for my own gratification and my own sanity. This is, in some ways, the most pure thing I’ve written since I was very young.’

STARTING POINT

‘[A screenplay idea] usually starts, oddly enough, with a scene. I imagine an interaction in my mind that is interesting to me, and then I think, “OK, what context would that appear in?” I kind of write the movie around it. That was how I wrote *Juno*. I was just imagining how awkward and interesting it would be for this pregnant teenage girl to show up at the well-appointed, upper-middle-class home of two adults that wanted to adopt her unborn baby. What would that conversation be like?’

‘With *Lisa Frankenstein*, for years I had wanted to write a movie about someone who comes back from the dead. [It’s] a theme that is resonant for a lot of people, because we kind of reinvent ourselves a lot over the course of a lifetime. I wanted to write this love story about a teenage girl and a corpse that would allow her to access her own grief, on her own timeline, because the living people around her aren’t going to let her have that.’

‘Everything that I write ultimately ends up being about transformation in some way – whether it’s about a girl turning into a cannibal demon, or a pregnant teenager, or a corpse who is becoming a real boy through the power of love and revenge.’

OBSERVE AND REPORT

‘I’m a journalist by nature. My blog was totally observational. I was working in



Charlize Theron (here with Asher Myles Fallica) plays a struggling mother in Cody’s 2018 film *Tully*

‘IF YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND PEOPLE, YOU CAN’T WRITE’



Jennifer Garner and Elliot Page in Cody’s Oscar-winning first script *Juno*

a strip club, and I was observing the interactions that I saw on a daily basis, which were fascinating. I was also, around that time, working for the local paper. Those skills were absolutely transferable to screenwriting. Because if you don’t understand people, you can’t do it. Observing people, their mannerisms, their dialects – I’ve always loved that stuff. And I’ve always written. I’d just never thought of screenwriting as the [format] that I’d wind up in.

‘Sometimes in this business, I do meet people [and] I can tell that their experience is limited, in that they grew up very

sheltered and very privileged, because I think that hobbles you as a writer.

‘You have to live. At the very least, you should be keeping a diary. For me, personally, that was more helpful to me than any book I could have read, or any course I could have taken. I’m on TikTok every day, because I need to know how to write people that are under 30 [laughs].’

BACKGROUND READING

‘[After being commissioned to write my first screenplay] I went to the bookstore and bought screenplays: *Ghost World*. *American Beauty*. Those were movies that I enjoyed. Reading them was helpful, because I was at least able to see, like, “OK, this is how it should look.” I watched movies. I already had a sense of act structure because I’d written a lot of fiction, so that part kind of came naturally to me.

‘I didn’t read any books about how to write a screenplay, though. I will eventually because I’m curious, and someday I would love to teach, so I’m sure I’m going to need it on the syllabus.

‘When I was younger, I [worried reading those books might mess with my process], and now I’m like: I’ve written how many screenplays in my own style? It wouldn’t kill me to pick up some technique from a book [laughs]. Maybe I should try it. Maybe I should read one of those books, and write a script according to the rules. It could be the best thing I’ve ever written.’

WRITING RITUALS

‘I’m imagining a life where I have the luxury of [having a strict writing routine]. I’m picturing myself at a pristine desk, and starting at a precise time each day. I can’t

do that. I kept having kids. I have three. They're a little bit older now. They're actually all downstairs, unsupervised, while I'm [doing this interview]. My laptop is right here, and I will probably pick it up, and continue writing on this beanbag surrounded by trash [after this].

'For people who have made different life choices, it's not necessary. I have had to teach myself to write in any situation at any time when I get a chance. I grab moments throughout the day. I grab moments before bed. But I don't get those big, luxurious, unbroken blocks of time that I once did.

'My one rule I have is, I have to work every day. I definitely work in bursts. I will have a day when I can crank out 20 pages, which is probably my absolute max, and I have to be under the gun for that [laughs]. And I might have a day where I write two.'

TUNING THE DIALOGUE

'I read all the dialogue [in my scripts] aloud, and do the scenes, and play the characters. It's really funny if I'm playing somebody's Appalachian grandmother, which I did

'YOU HAVE TO WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW. IT HAS TO BE PERSONAL, OR IT'S NOT GOING TO BE GOOD'

recently in one of my scripts. And I'm a terrible actor. So I'm sure it's a sight to behold. But I have to read it out loud as I write it. I can't hear it otherwise. I've always done that. It's fun to read it with other people, too, and put on a little play.

'It's hard not to [squirrel away dialogue that you hear in real life]. People are so funny. I've been writing a project about competitive cheerleading. Observing younger people on TikTok, and the way that they communicate with each other, has been really educational.

'I try to expose myself to as many people and ages as I can, and I try to get out of the bubble as often as I can. It gets harder as I get older. I can't just say, "Oh, I'm going to be a stripper for a year now because it might be interesting." I'm definitely a little more tethered than I was. I can still take a trip.'

GENERATING IDEAS

'My Notes app goes crazy; I'm always writing [potential ideas] down. It's funny, though, because now it's like I'm constantly having to generate new material. My first few screenplays, I always say that they were almost a treasury of things I wanted to say. I had such a backlog, and now I don't [laughs]. I've used it all. I better keep paying attention.

'Writer's block is real. I can't stand it when people say, "It's your lack of discipline. You've got to fight through it." Sometimes there's nothing there, and it puts me into a panic every time. I think, "This is it. My career is over. I can't write any more." And then something happens, and I feel inspired again.

'I wish I knew what triggers inspiration or a visit from the muse. But I don't know, and it sucks. If you gave me a job, and you said, "You need to go outside and plant 100 tulips every day" – I know I can do that. With writing, if you tell me I have to write 10 pages tomorrow, I actually don't know if I can do it [laughs]. It's not concrete. Honestly, it's a lot of mental stress. But it's also fun. The days when it's fun, it's like, "I can't believe that this is my profession. I can't believe I'm getting paid to tell this story.'"

ESSENTIAL ADVICE

'You need to put any commercial concerns aside, and write something that resonates with you. You have to write what you know. It has to be personal, or it's not going to be good. And the second thing I would say is, you have to take advantage of technology.

'I guess I'm a romantic, but I always say: the greatest screenplay you write is going to be the one that really comes from your heart. I just can't imagine a young person having a cynical outlook like, "I heard in Hollywood they're looking for more four-quadrant movies aimed towards women because *Barbie* was so successful, so I'm going to sit down and brainstorm those ideas." That makes me kind of sad. *Barbie* was amazing because it was personal to Greta Gerwig, and you have to find that story, too.'

LISA FRANKENSTEIN IS AVAILABLE ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND VOD.



Cole Sprouse and Kathryn Newton in the upcoming *Lisa Frankenstein*

THE HERO

In 22 years, Anthony Mackie has gone from rapping with Eminem (*8 Mile*) to headlining for Kathryn Bigelow (*The Hurt Locker*) to soaring in Marvel (in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* and more). Now the 45-year-old is leading *Twisted Metal*, a vivid post-apocalyptic action-comedy TV show he's also exec producing. 'The whole goal of being an actor is to have no responsibility!' he laughs. Oh well, not on this one...

Were you familiar with the *Twisted Metal* video game?

I was very familiar with it. I just sucked at it. I can't remember one time I won a battle in *Twisted Metal*. I've lost every single time I played. I'm not good with first-person. So if it's a character running through a forest collecting coins, I can do that all day. I can crush that. But if I'm the person who's handling, I'm really bad at that.

How would you describe your character, John Doe?

A whacked-out maniac. John is really unique. I mean, he's an adult, but he's a kid. The great thing about this show is he's experiencing everything for the first time. He's never seen a baby before. He's never kissed a girl before. He's never had ice cream before.

How would you fare in a post-apocalyptic wilderness?

Oh, I'm not faring at all. I don't want to live in a bunker and eat old crackers and peanut butter and rats! No! As soon as the apocalypse comes, take me out. I don't want to have to try and survive. I don't understand people who are like, 'I'm going to beat the odds and live in a hole and get malaria.' No, no, no, no.

'I'M REALLY TRYING TO GET KEANU REEVES TO CONSIDER ME FOR *JOHN WICK 5* OR *6*'



ANTHONY MACKIE THE ACTOR ON FAME, FALCON AND FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS...

You've been on screen for over two decades now. How have you coped with fame?

Fame is a very weird thing for me. It's not a natural emotion. It's not happy, sad, famous, you know? Fame isn't the reason I started doing what I did. I was a theatre kid. I would go and do plays. So the film thing... I happened into that. I didn't go into acting to do movies. I went into acting because I love theatre and storytelling. So it's been a slippery slope.

What do you remember about making *8 Mile*?

8 Mile was my first movie. It's funny to think now, 22 years later, what that movie has turned into

and how it kind of defines a generation. But Eminem was great to work with. He's still one of those guys who's a friend.

What was it like to meet Clint Eastwood on *Million Dollar Baby*?

Well, it was pretty amazing to see a 70-year-old Clint Eastwood curling 50-pound dumbbells outside of his trailer in between takes!

Was *The Hurt Locker* a big turning point for you?

Oh, *The Hurt Locker* was definitely a huge stepping stone. It was *8 Mile*, *Half Nelson*, *The Hurt Locker*, [and playing Marvel's] Falcon. But *The Hurt Locker* was a huge opportunity. I feel like I'm the most famous actor for getting other actors Oscar nominations! So I tell everybody, 'If you want to get a nomination, you call me. I'm your guy.'

What has playing Falcon meant to you?

It's been huge, man. I never expected the character to grow the way it did and branch out the way it has. I love making those little goofy Marvel movies [laughs]. I love going to set with my friends and showing up for work. It's really refreshing to do something that people are gonna appreciate and look forward to. We just have to give them the best possible product we can.

Do you have a bucket-list project you'd love to do?

I'm really trying to get Keanu Reeves to consider me for *John Wick 5* or *6*. I think that will make me a cool dad if I had, like, a five-minute fight scene with Keanu Reeves. I'm gonna put up a fight! [Pro wrestler] Samoa Joe punched me in the face in this [Twisted Metal] and I did not go down! **JAMES MOTTRAM**

**TWISTED METAL IS ON
PARAMOUNT+ NOW.**



(From top)
*Captain America:
The Winter Soldier,
8 Mile, Twisted Metal*

TOTAL FILM ON SALE NOW

GLADIATOR II WICKED SMILE 2

TOTAL

**SALEM'S LOT
AND THE BEST
STEPHEN KING
MOVIES**

**'It's the darkest
thing I've done'**
COLIN FARRELL

**JOKER
FOLIE À DEUX
REVIEWED**

**RIDLEY SCOTT
ON THE ART OF
DIRECTOR'S CUTS**

EXCLUSIVE!

THE

PENGUIN

THE BATMAN UNIVERSE EXPANDS IN GOTHAM'S GRITTIEST CHAPTER YET

**HIMESH PATEL
EMILY WATSON
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THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT

AT 25

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, *THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT* TERRIFIED EVERYONE – INCLUDING ITS CO-DIRECTOR, EDUARDO SÁNCHEZ. THE MONSTER HIT CONTINUES TO CAST A LONG SHADOW OVER HIS CAREER, AS HE DIVES DEEP ON HIS FOUND-FOOTAGE TRAILBLAZER, PASSING ON J.J. ABRAMS AND HOW HE FINALLY FREED HIMSELF FROM ITS 'CURSE'.

WORDS SAB ASTLEY

In 1999, *The Blair Witch Project* scared the world. 'It was so profoundly terrifying that I didn't watch it again for another decade,' Host director Rob Savage remembers. Co-directed by duo Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, who met during university, it signalled the arrival of an untapped style of genre filmmaking and shocked *[Rec]* co-director

Jaume Balagueró 'because it was a completely new approach to horror'.

The faux-doc horror follows a filmmaking trio who venture into Maryland's Black Hills Forest in pursuit of the mysterious 'Blair Witch'; only their tapes are ever recovered. 'I just remember it was all anybody wanted to talk about for, like, two weeks straight,' *Deadstream* co-director Vanessa Winter recalls. But no one was more terrified of the movie than co-director Eduardo Sánchez: 'How do you follow *The Blair Witch Project*?'

Although Sánchez grew up on a diet of classic 70s horror, it was the pseudo-documentary shows *In Search of...* (hosted by Leonard Nimoy) and *Unsolved Mysteries* that truly got under his skin. But before *Cannibal Holocaust*, even before *COPS*, Sánchez's number one inspiration for found footage? Bigfoot. 'For me and Dan, the Patterson-Gimlin film was the impetus for us to get into found footage. That film was the creepiest thing we'd ever seen.' These cinema-verité documentarians, alongside Sánchez's lifelong uneasiness around the deep wood, inspired

the stew of ideas for what would eventually become *The Blair Witch Project*.

In *The Blair Witch Project* a lingering malevolence hangs over the film. Even as Sánchez cranks up the horror, there's a purposeful ambiguity and control – something he learned from Spielberg. 'In *Jaws*, you feel its presence from the beginning – but you need to tease the shark. It's everything else that warns you of the danger, like John Williams' score.' The next time you watch *The Blair Witch Project*, close your eyes for a moment and just listen. Every sound is purposeful – a mandate from the directors that everything the audience can see and hear be authentic to the woodland setting. That is, apart from the unsettling sounds of children distantly playing through a boom box (recorded by Sánchez's mother) and the sinister effigies of sticks and stones scattered around. 'The iconography of the weird things in the woods – still so iconic, and still so scary,' *Watcher* director Chloe Okuno tells TF.

The Blair Witch Project opens with interspersed interviews featuring Burkittsville locals, their seductive naturalism a clever ploy from Sánchez and Myrick that immediately cements the authenticity of its world. 'The interviews are a big part for me – you start to believe you're interacting with real people. It's super-brilliant,' Winter says. The actual shoot only took eight days in total, with over 20 hours of footage shot entirely by the trio of actors Heather Donahue, Michael C. Williams and Joshua Leonard – Donahue had never even operated a camera before working on the ➤➤





Heather Donahue had never operated a camera before

➡ film. 'You definitely couldn't shoot the actors for the full 24 hours like we did back then any more,' Sánchez notes. To create a sense of isolating immersion, the pair directed from afar, leaving clues in milk crates the trio had to find using their GPS, only interacting with them directly during nightfall, to keep them from sleeping.

For Radio Silence duo Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett (*Scream*, *Abigail*), that immersive direction creates the film's magic: 'You have these wildly visceral performances that would hold up in any style of movie; they just happen to exist in this very lo-fi, handheld film,' Gillett says. That, coupled with the deliberately unprofessional and grainy nature of Heather's video footage, hammers home the upsetting authenticity that found footage can achieve. 'That's the haunting promise of found footage – the less you know, the more it grows. Found footage lives or dies by that mantra,' Sánchez maintains.

GOING VIRAL

Although production ended, the world-building did not. A year before the film's release, Sánchez and crew set up a website documenting the disappearance of the 'real' filmmakers, including police evidence, crime-scene photos and extracts of Heather's bloodied and aged diary. 'It's very exciting because it's all based on other things that



The shoot only took eight days in total

aren't in the movie but have their own personality. That's very powerful,' Balaguero remembers. This internet-led storytelling approach was groundbreaking at the time and was the key to *Blair Witch*'s phenomenon status. Sánchez remembers Jeff Johnsen, a champion of *The Blair Witch Project*, even appearing on an LA morning talk show and going through the website to explain it all. 'The traffic for the website blew up that same month,' the director says.

Sánchez's idea for the website came from his love of Lucasfilm's *Shadows of the Empire*, which used other forms of media – including a book, comics and a videogame – to create a story set between *Episodes V* and *VI*. 'I loved this concept, that it wasn't even centred around a movie. You had this whole universe centred around just an idea that kept

'IT WAS SUCH A CULTURAL MOMENT – IT ANTICIPATED SO MUCH OF WHAT IS POPULAR NOW'

CHLOE OKUNO

expanding.' This ambitious storytelling is something Sánchez has utilised throughout his career, from 150-page story bibles on sci-fi thriller *Altered* to whole transmedia shooting units on *Lovely Molly*.

After previewing snippets of footage at smaller festivals to gauge reactions, the film premiered at Sundance in January 1999, with Park City blanketed by 'missing person' posters featuring the cast. Indie distributor Artisan Entertainment picked up the film, another key moment for *The Blair Witch Project*. 'I don't think *Blair Witch* would've been handled the same way by any other company,' says Sánchez. Artisan, however, wanted to change the unforgettably unsettling ending in which Heather discovers Michael in the basement, facing the corner, but ultimately



the directors won out. 'The middle, that ambiguity, is where fear truly lies.'

The film opened in just 27 cinemas on 14 July 1999 and made \$1.5 million, scaring off *Eyes Wide Shut* with a per-cinema average more than six times that of Kubrick's highly publicised erotic thriller. Bettinelli-Olpin and Gillett remember being in packed cinemas and dorm rooms, transfixed: 'It just felt like there was something different and magic happening that was wildly unique,' says Bettinelli-Olpin. When the film went nationwide two weeks later, it made \$29.2 million. By the time it ended its theatrical run, it became the 10th highest-grossing film in the US that year, beating *Notting Hill*, *Stuart Little* and even *The World is Not Enough* in the US, and taking in \$250 million worldwide. 'It was such a cultural moment, it really anticipated so much of what is popular now,' Okuno recollects.

The Blair Witch Project seemed to electrify everyone who came into contact with it – except Sánchez and Myrick. 'I think due to the pressures of having such a success, and also the pressures of being a duo, co-directing and essentially co-birthing this movie together, my relationship with Dan started to break down.' Sánchez even remembers a time when a former agent asked him which one of them actually had the filmmaking talent. Artisan wanted to capitalise on the phenomenon, but Sánchez and Myrick's desire not to be pigeon-holed as the 'found-footage guys', alongside their eroding relationship, made them decline a follow-up. 'Honestly, we would have probably signed on, but they had a release date before they even had an idea,' the director says. 'Everyone knows it's not a good idea to set a release date and then come up with a movie.'



The film took \$250 million worldwide



Joshua Leonard and Michael C. Williams

LOST AND FOUND

The Blair Witch... led to a lot of other projects being offered the duo's way, including the chance to helm the J.J. Abrams-penned 2001 horror-thriller *Joy Ride*. 'We went down the road a little bit,' Sánchez says. 'I liked it but Dan didn't, so we passed.' Abrams would eventually go on to create his own found-footage monster hit *Cloverfield* with Matt Reeves in 2008, which Sánchez humbly cites as the true galvanisation moment for found footage: 'It opened the door for everything, and it's been really exciting to see the evolution of found-footage movies since.'

Of all the early 2000s horror movies released, Sánchez believes he read '90%' of the scripts, and had offers to direct a quarter of them. But with a lack of a clear mentor, the difficulty of convincing two filmmakers to unite on one project, and the pressure of following up one of the most successful independent films of all time, Sánchez stepped away from filmmaking entirely. 'Honestly, I was scared. I felt like I didn't know how to handle a big movie.'

Sánchez retired from filmmaking for six years until sci-fi thriller *Altered*, in which a motley crew seek revenge on the alien that

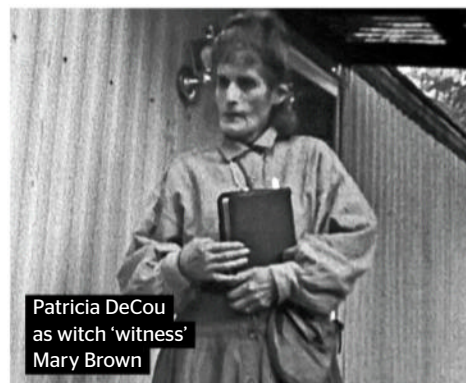


The movie brought 'found footage' into mainstream cinema

killed their friend. Despite a huge blow from a change in *Altered*'s release plans due to executive departures at the distributor, Sánchez powered on, his filmmaking desire rekindled. He flirted with found footage on *Lovely Molly* before finally returning in full to the style with Bigfoot creature feature *Exists* and V/H/S 2 short *A Ride in the Park*. 'It was just so fun to get back into it, see how we could update it and have fun with it. We loved seeing how people had evolved the style, and that the emphasis was on scaring the crap out of you instead of convincing you it was real.'

Sánchez is even developing a new project he describes as 'our own new version of found footage', noting that – as with *The Blair Witch Project* – he's experimenting as much as possible. Found footage has now come so far since 1999, with many directors having evolved the style bit by bit – what does the future of found footage look like to them?

'The playground is bigger and the technology is more accessible than ever. What I've always loved about found footage is it's not story-based, it's style-based,' says Sánchez. This foundation of style is why Bettinelli-Olpin and Gillett boarded the V/H/S franchise as producers: 'There's the opportunity for new voices to emerge and go, "Oh, that's a good point of view I haven't seen before",' says Bettinelli-Olpin. Chloe Okuno agrees that opportunities like the V/H/S



Patricia DeCou as witch 'witness' Mary Brown



The distributors initially wanted to change the ending

franchise open doors for aspiring filmmakers. 'It's such a good way to allow them to deliver something that's like their pure vision.'

This accessibility alongside a now near-endless stream of footage is something Rob Savage believes is the key to its evolution. 'There's an opportunity to do what *Blair Witch* did in the 90s now with live streaming and the way we digest stories.' The internet's growing prevalence in found-footage stories – *Spree*, *Dashcam* and *Deadstream* being recent examples – suggest perhaps footage is no longer found, but lived. 'The genre is remaking itself, there's this consideration of what other levels we can take in terms of scares and entertainment,' Winter adds.

Recently, Blumhouse announced their own plans to resurrect *The Blair Witch Project*, hoping to scare a whole new generation of moviegoers with a brand-new take on the horror. The question is, how do you improve a film many believe was perfect the first time round? 'It's one of those definitive of-an-era movies,' Gillett says. 'There's a simplicity that will never be matched,' Savage adds. What does Sánchez make of his film's legacy? 'Man, just the possibility these talented filmmakers were even slightly inspired – it's just really fun to see where it's gone and where it's continuing to go.'

THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT IS AVAILABLE ON BLU-RAY, DVD AND DIGITAL.



GREMLINS

As the most enduring monster movie of the 80s turns 40, director Joe Dante and producer Michael Finnell tell *Total Film* how ignoring the rules helped them to create a nostalgic classic...

WORDS SIMON BLAND

A void bright lights, don't get them wet, and whatever you do, never feed them after midnight... The rules were simple yet despite these clear warnings, we all learnt the hard way what happens if any of these mandates were broken – and it wasn't pretty. In fact, according to director Joe Dante, no one was more dismayed at the gleefully slimy chaos that ensued in his 1984 monster-hit *Gremlins* than the studio that helped make it a reality.

'[Warner Bros.] just didn't get it,' Dante tells *Total Film*, recalling the early days of his Steven Spielberg-produced Christmas classic 40 years after it first hit cinemas. 'They thought the Gremlins doing stuff like blowing their nose on the curtains was disgusting. At one point they said, "The only thing wrong with this movie is that it's got too many Gremlins in it." Spielberg said, "Well, we can cut out the Gremlins and call it *People* but nobody's gonna go see it..."'

Based on a spec script by the then-unknown *Home Alone* filmmaker Chris Columbus,

Gremlins has become one of the most beloved movies of the 80s. It follows Billy Peltzer (Zach Galligan), a young man who receives a mysterious creature known as a Mogwai as a gift from his inventor father – along with those three all-important rules. Unfortunately for him but fortunately for us, it's not long before these are broken, unleashing a gaggle of cackling green Gremlins on his sleepy suburban town. Together with girlfriend Kate (Phoebe Cates) and new Mogwai pal Gizmo, Billy must stop head Gremlin Stripe from multiplying before things get even more out of hand.

'[Spielberg] was familiar with my stuff,' says Dante on how directing 1978's low-budget *Jaws* rip-off *Piranha* and 1981's werewolf horror *The Howling* convinced Spielberg he was the right guy to helm Amblin's debut release. 'My Roger Corman beginnings marked me as a B-picture director and since Spielberg's view was that this was going to be a B-horror movie, I was judged appropriate for the role. Chris Columbus' original draft was intended to be a B-horror movie, which is what Steven wanted to do as his first Amblin production



VIOLENT DELIGHTS

This mixture of sweet Spielberg-heart and darkly funny Dante-danger had *Gremlins* shaping up to be a family-friendly frightener. But before cameras could roll, a few issues had to be ironed out. 'It was originally much more violent,' says *Gremlins* producer Michael Finnell of Columbus' original story, 'which was fine with us, but the other problem was that it was virtually impossible to produce with the technology that existed at that time.' Dante adds: 'It was pretty gruesome. Billy's mother got her head chopped off and it bounced down the stairs and the Gremlins ate the dog. It was really grizzly, like many horror movies of that period were.'

With Spielberg's help, Dante and Columbus reigned in the chaos but even then, bringing these creatures to life was daunting. 'It was obvious we had to tame the movie to make it work for a wider audience. I think that was all for the good, too; had it been R-rated, it would still be languishing on the shelves,' suggests Dante. Finnell agrees: 'The original script had *Gremlins* running around in the snow and we couldn't do that; there was no such thing as CGI back in 1983. We had to change the screenplay into something we could actually make.'

Thankfully, Columbus had already done some of the design legwork, providing useful doodles with his script that gave Spielberg, Dante, Finnell and special effects artist and original Gremlin and Gizmo designer, Chris Walas, a starting point. 'Chris' sketches are not dissimilar to what we ended up with. They had the big ears, teeth, brows and reptilian quality,' says Dante of the design that ended up in his finished film. 'Gizmo was much more difficult because the fuzzy Mogwai design was up for grabs. There were a lot of possibilities but you had to think practically. OK, you can design it - but can you make it work?'

Luckily, there was a get-out clause. In Columbus' original draft, Gizmo only appeared for the first 20 minutes before transforming



Zach Galligan starred as Billy, who receives the mysterious Mogwai as a gift from his father

into Stripe. However, a bright idea from Spielberg made things much more complicated. 'Steven started taking a liking to Gizmo - particularly as we turned him into the colour of his cocker spaniel,' laughs Dante. 'At a dangerously late stage, he said, "We should keep this character around for the whole movie and he should be the hero's pal." We were about a month away from shooting and had this little pile of bolts and fur that would allow us to make 20 minutes of this character. Suddenly he had to be a star of the movie. We had to completely revamp our plans.'

Walas worked overtime, inventing new techniques that would make Gizmo a living, breathing character. Multiple interchangeable faces were sculpted, each boasting a different expression that could be controlled by puppeteers on off-camera video monitors and swapped out to help Gizmo emote. A terrifying giant Mogwai head and suit were also created for close-ups requiring a more intimate level of detail. 'It was really big,' recalls Finnell, 'and whatever the background was had to be double-sized too, so we had to make double-sized props. It wasn't used a lot but you can tell because it's much more expressive.'

While a challenge, Dante still thinks Spielberg's decision to keep Gizmo around was the right choice: 'I credit it as the main reason why the picture is still so popular.'

NEW WAVE

Meanwhile, the Gremlins were a different beast entirely - and the script called for there to be loads of them, each doing sinister things and meeting slimy ends. During one particularly tense scene, Billy's mother kills three Gremlins single-handedly, with audiences finding out what happens when you put a Gremlin in a microwave. So how was that effect created? 'We put a Gremlin in a microwave. How else?' smirks Dante. 'We had a button that would explode the Gremlin inside [the microwave],' he reveals. 'It was very gooey and a one-take situation because we only had one microwave.'

There were also multiple crowd shots, like the famous cinema sequence where Stripe gathers the gremlins for a screening of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. 'There were lots of them [in that scene],' says Finnell of the number of puppets required to pull off this iconic moment. 'Some were



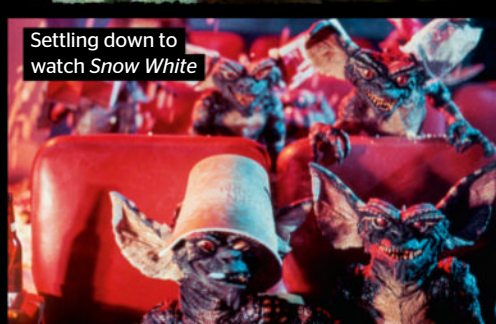
Gizmo's role was rewritten to be 'the hero's pal'



Stripe terrorises poor Gizmo



Phoebe Cates played Billy's girlfriend Kate

Settling down to watch *Snow White*

literally hand puppets with no mechanics in them. I'm actually in there behind the seats with a couple on my hands,' he laughs. 'We optically duplicated more rows because there weren't enough to fill the entire theatre.'

One of the hardest sequences to capture saw the Gremlins overrun the tavern and trap Kate. In fact, it was so difficult that Dante shut down production to figure out how to do it. '[It allowed us to] fix puppets and plan the scenes with just the Gremlins, one of which was the bar scene – which, by the way, is the bar from

The Shootist,' notes Dante, adding some classic movie trivia to our *Gremlins* chat. 'We brought Phoebe back and shot just the stuff in the bar for a week. We left the rough cut in [previews] to see what worked with audiences and kept the parts we thought worked best,' he reveals. 'It was such a time-consuming process and there was so much stale popcorn sitting in beer for a week that it wasn't the most fragrant of sets. It was exhausting but a lot of fun.'

In the end, Dante used all kinds of movie trickery to help create Gremlin mayhem, some

simpler than others. 'The idea of Stripe shrinking into nothingness was actually the opposite of what was happening,' reveals Dante of the head Gremlin's gooey death scene. 'He was really being blown up. A tremendous amount of the movie was shot forward but played backwards – like the Gremlin sticking his head in the mixing bowl [during the kitchen scene]. He's actually taking his head out of it.' The tip-off? Billy's mother: 'If you look carefully, she's blinking the wrong way.'

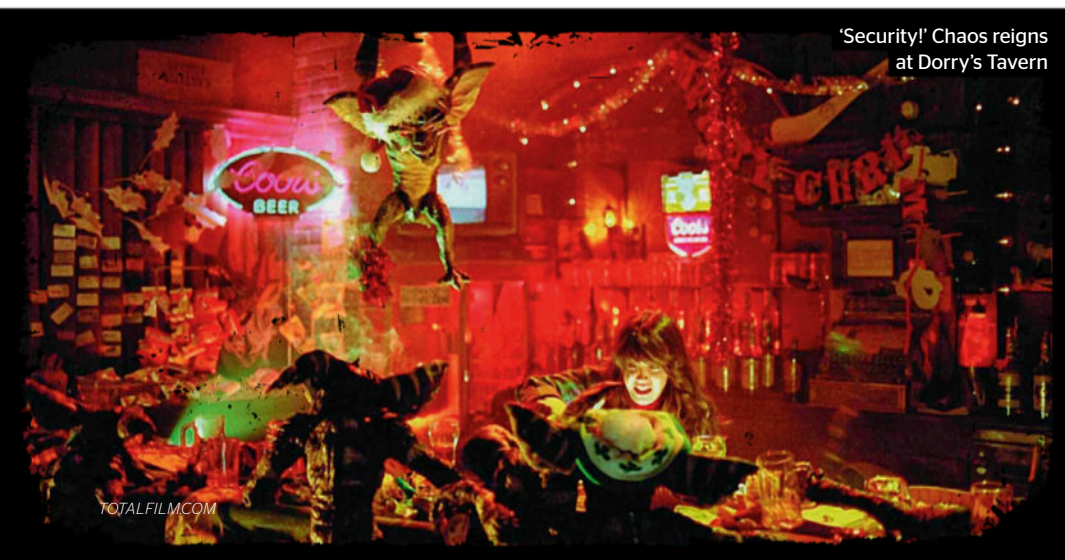
Wild early previews let Dante know he was onto a hit but Spielberg still had notes including who should save the day. 'Originally, it was Billy [who kills Stripe],' says Finnell, 'but Steven said, "You know, really Gizmo should do that." We added that last minute. Zach was very upset.' However, Dante stood firm when it came to the suggested cutting of the now-infamous

'It was originally much more violent. Billy's mother got her head chopped off and the Gremlins ate the dog' **JOE DANTE**

scene where Kate explains how her hatred of Christmas linked back to the accidental death of her father. 'It encapsulated the whole ethos of the picture,' reasons the director. 'There's a duality of humour and horror but Warner Bros. just hated it.' Spielberg had his back but even then, the studio persisted: 'I heard after it was out they were sending instructions to projectionists to see if they could cut it, which thankfully didn't happen.'

Four decades on, it's clear that Warner Bros. had nothing to worry about, with *Gremlins* fandom still running strong and a third movie reportedly in the works from original writer Columbus. 'It's certainly the movie both Joe and I are most identified with,' admits Finnell. 'I fully expect my obituary to start with, "Gremlins producer dies at the age of... 103,"' he laughs. 'I can't knock *Gremlins* because it's kept me working,' adds Dante. 'I'm one of a number of 80s directors whose pictures were not box-office bonanzas but became very popular on home video. I've gone to film festivals all over the world and ran *Gremlins* for children in different languages and they always relate to it because, at heart, it's a "boy and his dog movie",' he says. 'The relationship between Billy and Gizmo is what makes [it].'

GREMLINS IS AVAILABLE NOW ON 4K UHD, BLU-RAY, DVD, VOD AND STREAMING.



'Security!' Chaos reigns at Dorry's Tavern



After Hours

Griffin Dunne looks back on starring as the hapless hero in Martin Scorsese's exhilarating nightmare comedy...

WORDS JAMIE GRAHAM



In the 1980s, Griffin Dunne starred in two movies that opened to mixed receptions but are now considered classics. One was John Landis' horror comedy *An American Werewolf in London* (1981); the other was midnight-black screwball thriller *After Hours* (1985), directed by Martin Scorsese.

'It is now de rigueur for every horror movie to have humour and horror in the same frame, but that was considered sacrilege at the time,' says Dunne, now 68, of *An American Werewolf in London*. 'I played Jack Goodman [who's killed by a werewolf and returns as an

animated corpse to warn his friend David of his hairy fate], and it was my job to be funny, despite how torn up and rotting my corpse was. Jack went through his own living hell in various degradations.'

Dunne's character in *After Hours*, Paul Hackett, has it a whole lot worse. A meek computer operator, he meets Marcy (Rosanna Arquette) in a New York coffee shop and scores her phone number. When he calls, she invites him over to her loft in SoHo, but the night rapidly descends into the date from hell. And there's no escape. As Paul desperately tries to flee, he's confronted by irate cabbies,

bumbling cat burglars, crazed waitresses, punks, sadomasochists, a corpse and more, until his increasingly hostile encounters peak with a baying mob chasing him through the streets. Maybe it's because we've all had a nightmare date that the movie has gathered such a following over the years?

'I certainly did,' grins Dunne, who grew up in New York. 'You're at an age where you're really open to experience, to adventure. You know, I've met someone on the subway or in a bar, and they seem one way, and then it's like, "How do I get this person out of my apartment?" Or, "Am I going to get knifed



Paul meets June (Verna Bloom, left) and sculptor Kiki (Linda Fiorentino)



Comedy double act Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong appeared as burglars Neil and Pepe



Griffin Dunne as Paul Hackett with Rosanna Arquette as Marcy Franklin. Right: Teri Garr played waitress Julie

right here, in my own house?" He laughs. 'Bad-date movies became a genre after this. And *After Hours* has become an adjective for a type of movie, or a type of night or date, that goes south.'

Scorsese's involvement came about quickly. For many months he'd been prepping *The Last Temptation of Christ*, to shoot in Israel. Aidan Quinn had lost a good deal of weight to play Jesus, Harvey Keitel had dyed his hair red for Judas. But Paramount pulled the plug just four days before the shoot was to begin –

already fearful of the escalating budget and the protests of the Moral Majority, the studio lost its nerve when Philip Kaufman's epic *The Right Stuff* flopped. Determined to shoot a movie, Scorsese ploughed through numerous scripts and settled on *After Hours*, which had been written by Joe Minion at Columbia University (he got an A) and was owned by Dunne and his producing partner, Amy Robinson. Pledging to make it 'all style', Scorsese shot 16 set-ups a day (or rather, night) on a \$3.5m budget; usually he did five set-ups a day and the budget of his previous movie, *The King of Comedy*, was \$20m.

'He was excited to go back to his *Mean Streets* roots, and the run-and-gun he had on *Taxi Driver*,' Dunne recalls. 'He has said it brought back his passion and love for moviemaking. It was certainly exhilarating. Marty was so prepared. On the call sheet was stapled the shot list of everything we were doing that day.'

The movie didn't have an ending. They scrambled for ideas. At one point, the character of June (Verna Bloom) was going to balloon in size and have Paul climb inside her womb to escape the mob.

'Yes! I have to confess: we loved that idea,' adds Dunne. 'Verna goes, "I know where you can hide." She opens her legs and I climb inside her. She's now fecund with Paul Hackett. She ends up on the West Side Highway, and she lies down and gives birth to me. And naked, covered in placenta, I come tumbling out. So I called David Geffen, who financed the film, and I said, "We've got the ending." I explained it. He takes a beat and goes, "Have you all lost your fucking minds?"'

It was legendary English director Michael Powell, a hero of Scorsese's, who suggested the elegant, Kafka-esque climax of Paul ending up back at his work desk. Steven Spielberg and Terry Gilliam agreed. It was an inspired finish to an inspired film, which now, nearly 40 years on, is so often described as Scorsese's most underrated movie, it's not underrated at all. For Dunne, the steadily growing praise has been a mixed blessing.

'Well, having this be the second movie to have that happen, it's flattering, exhilarating and kind of frustrating that it wasn't appreciated like that at the time. And I always suspected that would be the case.' Really? 'Yeah, on both films. I always thought, "They're not getting it, quite. They're going to."'

THE NEW 4K RESTORATION OF *AFTER HOURS* IS OUT NOW ON 4K UHD.



There are times in the movie business when it pays to be thought of as a dangerously psychotic person,' wrote William Friedkin in his 2013 autobiography. Indeed, when it suited him, the Oscar-winning director could be as unpredictable as a powder-keg on a volcano. Before filming began on *The Exorcist* in 1972, Friedkin concocted a ruse with screenwriter William Peter Blatty – a fabricated argument about salad dressing – to make sure the Warner Bros. bean counters were wary of upsetting them. Five years later, while meeting executives about 1977's *Sorcerer*, he glugged from a bottle of vodka before pretending to pass out. 'Does this happen often?' enquired Paramount's Barry Diller. 'Every day,' replied writer Walon Green.

Stories like these, and a hundred others, earned Friedkin the moniker Hurricane Billy, or Wacky Willy for short, and they helped cement his image as an arrogant, hubristic flame-out who flew too close to the sun and came crashing down to earth. 'I thought I was bulletproof. Nothing was going to stop me,' he later conceded. 'When people tell you how great you are, you start to believe it.' And thanks in part to the portrait author Peter Biskind painted in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, he came to embody the egotism of the New Hollywood generation and the folly of giving flamboyant auteurs power over their projects.

Friedkin certainly had no problem playing up to his persona in public appearances and press interviews. 'I don't give a flying fuck into a rolling doughnut about...' was one of his favourite conversational gambits, and he loved telling how he thumbed his nose towards Alfred ➤➤



EYE OF THE HU

Combative, outspoken and always entertaining,
William Friedkin took no prisoners and pulled no punches.
Total Film looks back on a legendary life.

WORDS NEIL SMITH



RRICANE



The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial was completed before Friedkin passed away in August 2023



The director giving an innocent-looking Linda Blair plenty of swears to do on set of *The Exorcist*



2011's *Killer Joe* (above) and 1985's *To Live and Die in L.A.* (bottom)

➤ Hitchcock at the Directors Guild Awards. The master of suspense had taken him to task seven years earlier for not wearing a tie while making one of his *Hitchcock Hours*. While passing Hitch's table at that 1972 event, Friedkin snapped his bow tie in front of his face. 'He didn't remember his comment, or me,' he later acquiesced. 'But I said I'd get that fat bastard one day, and I did.'

Yet the Friedkin who had a car race at 90mph past unsuspecting Brooklynites in *The French Connection*, and had a wire yank *The Exorcist*'s Ellen Burstyn so hard it damaged her spine, was more than the maverick provocateur he was characterised as. Born in Chicago in 1935, he was admittedly an indifferent student more interested in basketball than learning, only later coming to develop an autodidact's passion for literature, painting and music. He surprised himself and others by eventually turning his talents to opera, putting on productions of Richard Strauss' *Salome* and Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffman*.

After graduating from high school, Friedkin landed a job in the mailroom at Chicago's WGN-TV station without realising he had actually applied to work for one of its rivals. From there he progressed to floor management, earning a valuable lesson in the process from one of its veterans: 'You've got to be a prick, kid,' he told the young Friedkin. 'Everyone thinks you are anyway!'

He took that advice to heart, going on to direct a plethora of live shows and documentaries with the bullish, no-nonsense demeanour that would become his trademark. One of the latter, 1962's *The People vs. Paul Crump*, caused enough of a furore to get its subject's death sentence commuted to life imprisonment. Yet Friedkin used unorthodox methods to make Crump retell his story, at one point summoning the emotion he was after by slapping him across the face. (He used the technique again on William O'Malley, the real-life priest who played *The Exorcist*'s Father Dyer.)

At that time, Friedkin had no interest in making films, but then a friend recommended they go to the cinema to see *Citizen Kane*. He ended up watching every showing of Orson Welles' classic that day – and went back to watch it again the next. It was a life-changing moment that opened his eyes to what films could accomplish.

However, his feature debut – 1967's *Good Times*, a skit-laden vehicle for Sonny and Cher – hardly set tills ringing, while his 1968 adaptation of Harold Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* pleased even fewer. *The Night They Raided Minsky's* (also 1968) was by his own admission 'a disaster' that he would advise viewers to avoid during an appearance on British television. (Years later he did something similar by encouraging Amazon customers who had bought an inferior DVD of *Sorcerer* to ask for their money back.) And while 1970's *The Boys in the Band* earned him a degree of praise, it was also criticised by some



Friedkin directed *The French Connection* to win Oscar acclaim – but it wasn't without its issues

queer commentators who found its vision of gay life reductive. The director later expressed regret for excising a scene in which two of his male stars kissed.

Four flops in a row hardly augured well as Friedkin hit 35, though one film he would become attached to had potential. A friend had optioned a book about what was then the largest heroin seizure on US soil. And despite the book itself leaving him unimpressed, its subjects, a couple of colourful New York City detectives called Eddie Egan and Sonny Grosso, proved irresistible. 'They were probably the definitive good cop/bad cop duo,' the director told *Total Film* in 2019. 'I was always much more interested in them than I was in the case. I spent a lot of time with those guys and went out with them on various assignments. The way I portrayed them in the film was exactly how they were.'

The French Connection is a grittily authentic policier that broke new ground with its documentary-style realism, morally ambiguous anti-hero and bravely downbeat ending, yet its path to classic status was anything but assured. Friedkin had no faith in star Gene Hackman and clashed with him continually. (The first day saw the filming of an interrogation scene run to 35 takes.) A mix-up, meanwhile, saw the wrong Spaniard hired to play the villain after casting director Robert Weiner confused Francisco Rabal with compatriot Fernando Rey. 'It's *The French Connection* you schmuck, not *The Spanish Connection*!' Friedkin fumed, having incorrectly assumed Francisco was as Gallic as a crêpe.



Friedkin thought *Sorcerer* was his masterpiece. Critics and the box office, however, thought differently

critical and commercial failure,' he told this magazine. 'We all got sick and after I came home, I contracted malaria. When the film failed at the box office it took a heavy toll. I thought I had made my masterpiece and I wasn't myself for years.'

Crime caper *The Brink's Job* (1978) came and went with nary a ripple, while 1980's *Cruising* served as a lightning rod for controversy. 'The world of S&M hadn't been portrayed in a mainstream movie before,' said the director of his lurid thriller, starring Al Pacino, that had New York's gay community angrily picketing its set. 'But I don't think people were aware of how far I was prepared to take it.' Having visited clubs in a jockstrap as part of his research ('Nobody hit on me... I was the ugliest guy in the room'), Friedkin shot 40 minutes of leather-bar hardcore knowing full well the ratings board would cut it. Another snip – the one Pacino suffered at the hands of a West Village barber – stopped cameras turning for six weeks; the length of time it took for his Samson-like tresses to grow back.

To *Live and Die in L.A.* (1985) marked a partial return to form and gave Friedkin the opportunity to film another pulse-pounding *French Connection*-style car chase. In truth, though, he was now a largely spent force, the likes of supernatural horror *The Guardian* (1990), sports movie *Blue Chips* (1994) and erotic thriller

'I NEVER PLAYED BY THE RULES, OFTEN TO MY OWN DETRIMENT'

WILLIAM FRIEDKIN

Jade (1995) doing nothing to resuscitate his flagging career. A new century brought more controversy, his courtroom drama *Rules of Engagement* (2000) prompting accusations of jingoism, yet it also saw him rediscover his flair for stage-to-screen transfers through a pair of Tracy Letts' adaptations, 2006's *Bug* and 2011's *Killer Joe*. A film of Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial* was completed shortly before his death.

'I never played by the rules, often to my own detriment,' Friedkin once observed. 'But I never dragged my tail and said, "Aw, shucks," when things went bad. I managed to hang on out of ambition, luck and the grace of God. Notice I didn't mention talent.'

And though Friedkin may have not acknowledged his own skill for filmmaking, Ellen Burstyn did in her tribute following his passing, remembering her 'friend' as 'cultured, fearless and wildly talented'.

'He had a big, wonderful life,' agreed Sherry Lansing, his wife for 32 years. 'There was no dream unfulfilled...'

THE CAINE MUTINY COURT-MARTIAL IS AVAILABLE TO STREAM NOW ON PARAMOUNT+ AND TO BUY ON VOD.

If Fox's marketing chief had prevailed, however, the film might have been titled *Popeye* after its protagonist's cartoony nickname.

On 10 April 1972, *The French Connection* won five Academy Awards, including one for best director. Friedkin, though, nearly missed the ceremony, a broken-down motor obliging him to beg a stranger for a lift. 'Winning the award isn't everything – it's the only thing,' he would subsequently assert. 'It's as important to me as being president.' But beneath the outward displays of confidence – including stamping his director's chair on *The Exorcist* with the words 'An Oscar for *The French Connection*' – Friedkin couldn't help feeling that he had peaked too early. 'The bar had been raised too high, too soon,' he would later rue. 'I didn't think I was skilled enough to sustain it with consistency.'

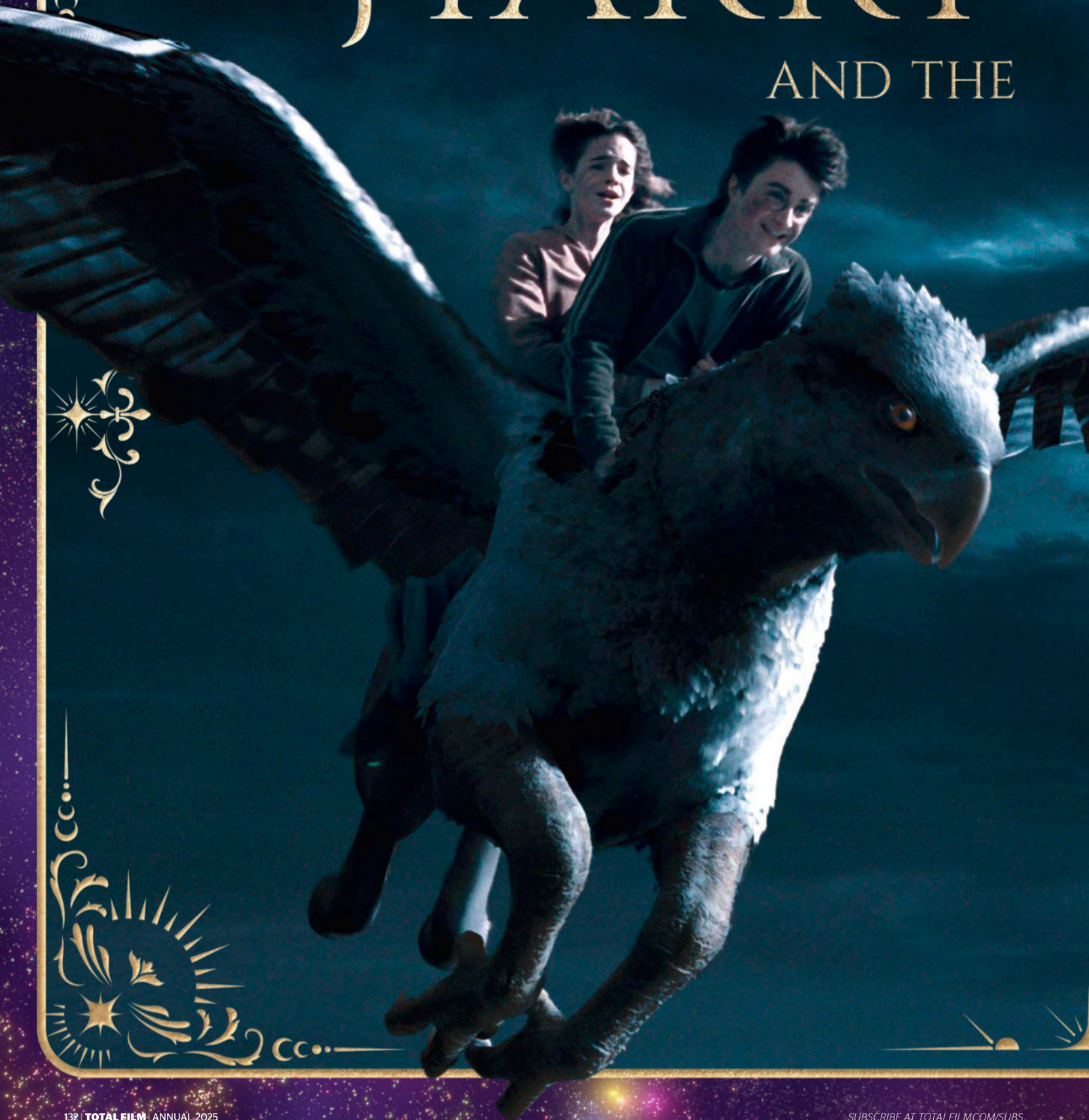
The phenomenal success of *The Exorcist* in 1973 allayed many of those fears, yet a comeuppance was imminent in the form of *Sorcerer*, his remake of the French thriller *The*

Wages of Fear. The problem was Friedkin's obstinate insistence on making the project his way. His biggest error, he later admitted, was refusing to find a compromise that would allow him to cast Steve McQueen, who was the top choice for the film's lead. Despite McQueen wanting to appear in the film, Friedkin refused to write a part for the actor's new wife, Ali MacGraw. McQueen then came back with two alternatives: offer MacGraw an executive producer credit so that she could be on set, or move the filming to the US. Friedkin denied both and Roy Scheider was cast instead.

A self-destructive tone was set – and it continued into the shoot. Friedkin gave other roles to virtual unknowns, while filming in the Dominican Republic saw the budget balloon to \$22m, a tenth of that going towards a suspension bridge that had to be rebuilt in Mexico when the waters beneath it evaporated. 'The two studios that financed it didn't know what the hell I was doing and it opened as a

HARRY

AND THE



POTTER

PRISONER OF AZKABAN

at

20

AS THE FILM WIDELY REGARDED AS THE BEST HARRY POTTER MOVIE HITS ITS TWO-DECADE ANNIVERSARY, *TOTAL FILM* CHATS TO VISIONARY DIRECTOR ALFONSO CUARÓN AND FRANCHISE PRODUCER DAVID HEYMAN ABOUT ROLLING THE DICE TO TAKE THE SERIES IN A DEEPER, DARKER DIRECTION...

WORDS JAMIE GRAHAM



was not very aware of Potter's universe and I was surprised to be offered it, coming from *Y tu mamá también*,' recalls director Alfonso Cuarón, who's talking to *Total Film* 20 years on from the release of his one and only dip into J.K. Rowling's Wizarding World, with *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. The third movie in the Potter franchise, it was, at the time, by some distance the best in the series – and the critical consensus did not alter once the dust settled on the five movies that followed.

'I was confused because it was completely not on my radar,' Cuarón continues. 'I speak often with Guillermo [del Toro], and a couple of days after, I said, "You know, they offered me this Harry Potter film, but it's really weird they offer me this." He said, "Wait, wait, wait, you said you haven't read Harry Potter?" I said, "I don't think it's for me." In very florid lexicon, in Spanish, he said, "You are an arrogant asshole."'

'I'd seen *Y tu mamá también*, which I loved, and I oddly thought he'd be the perfect director for the third Potter,' remembers David Heyman, who in 1999 bought the rights to Rowling's first four novels and went on to produce all eight Potter movies and the three Fantastic Beasts prequels that came after. He grins into the Zoom camera. 'That's not what some might think. Can you imagine what some thought Harry, Ron and Hermione would get up to, having seen *Y tu mamá también*?' It's a fair point – Cuarón's Mexican road movie about two 17-year-old guys and a 28-year-old woman enjoying uninhibited sex was full of action, and we don't mean quidditch. 'Y tu mamá was about the last moments of being a teenager, and *Azkaban* was about the first moments of being a teenager,' Heyman notes. 'I felt he could make the show feel, in a way, more contemporary. And just bring his cinematic wizardry.'

Now, with *Children of Men* and *Gravity* on his CV, Cuarón seems like a more obvious choice than he did in the early noughties. Back then, the director had made only Mexican romcom *Sólo con tu pareja*, *A Little Princess* (which both Heyman and Rowling adored), *Great Expectations* starring Ethan Hawke, and *Y tu mamá también*, meaning he was untested on a film of *Azkaban*'s scale. Surely Warner Bros. wouldn't entrust their golden goose to Cuarón? The first two movies, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, had together rung up almost \$1.9bn at the worldwide box office – the kind of prize you'd employ three-headed dog Fluffy to protect. That there was to be a change at all was only because Chris Columbus (*Home Alone*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*) wished to spend more time with his family. He would stay on as a producer, but had chosen to vacate the director's chair.

Heyman, leaning on Rowling's support for Cuarón, flew to LA to meet with Alan F. Horn, President and COO of Warner Bros. Due diligence meant that there

were several names under discussion – del Toro, Marc Forster, Callie Khouri, M. Night Shyamalan and Kenneth Branagh, fresh from playing charismatic charlatan Gilderoy Lockhart in *Chamber of Secrets*, were all reportedly in the sorting hat – but it was Cuarón whose name was plucked out and announced to the world in July 2002. The franchise 'needed to grow with the books', stressed Heyman, and *Prisoner of Azkaban* represented the pivotal moment when Harry (Daniel Radcliffe), Hermione (Emma Watson) and Ron (Rupert Grint) were to undergo their most terrifying encounter yet: puberty.

TEENAGE KICKS

Prisoner of Azkaban is the last of the Potter books that can be described as lean, but is, nonetheless, a complex, densely plotted affair. Adapted by returning scribe Steve Kloves, the script details Harry attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for his third year, only to find the beloved institution shrouded in fear. Circling the dark skies above Hogwarts are the Dementors, wraith-like creatures normally found guarding the fortress of Azkaban in the middle of the North Sea, where the worst criminals in the Wizarding World are detained. These cold, callous creatures now haunt Hogwarts because convicted murderer Sirius Black (Gary Oldman) has escaped from Azkaban. Black, it is whispered, was the most devoted follower of Voldemort, and is now intent on killing Harry to avenge the Dark Lord.

But the plot, full of twists and turns and incorporating new Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor Professor Remus Lupin (David Thewlis), is only a part of it. Also in play are the secrets of Harry's past as the series begins to properly dig into just what it is that makes him who he is – the famed only survivor of an attack by Voldemort. And then there's a host of terrific set-pieces, new magical creatures, a clockwork-precise time-travel element, and, crucially, these now-teenage kids beginning to struggle with not just their hormones but their very identities.

'The first two Potters deal with children's experience,' reflects Cuarón. 'Characters who are 11 and 12. Innocence. A purity even in the way they see the danger. We were dealing with the first sting of questioning everything, particularly who you are. Suddenly you are not part of the whole; there is a teenage separation.'



Stars Emma Watson, Daniel Radcliffe and Rupert Grint



New cast members such as David Thewlis and Gary Oldman added a darker energy

‘AZKABAN WAS ABOUT THE FIRST MOMENTS OF BEING A TEENAGER’

DAVID HEYMAN

The director came to the production – the first to swell from a year-long time frame to 18 months, necessitated by the deepening and darkening of the books – with plenty of tricks up his sleeve. For starters, he sought to capture naturalistic performances from the young cast, who were now of an age where they could wrestle with their characters’ motivations and emotions rather than simply recite the lines.

‘Chris [Columbus] would help them with intonation and get them excited; Alfonso was treating them as young adults: what are you feeling?’ explains Heyman. ‘Alfonso also had the three kids write essays about their characters. Dan wrote a page, Emma wrote 10 or 12, and Rupert didn’t give in anything. Just perfect.’

‘They were becoming more aware of the craft of acting and they wanted to go to the next stage,’ says Cuarón, who was satisfied that they understood their

characters given how perfectly the effort they put into their essays chimed with their on-screen personalities. ‘From the get-go we talked about how we wanted to ground everything, to make it about a normal human experience in this world. [We wanted to explore] the internal life of each one of these characters. They were incredibly intuitive about this, and very receptive.’

Another trick Cuarón employed was to bring in costume designer Jany Temime and together work on ensuring that each teen wore their school uniform to express their individuality. In the first two movies, the uniforms were, well, uniform, worn as a child would present themselves on the first day of school. In *Azkaban*, shirts are untucked, ties loosely knotted and sleeves rolled, while any time spent outside of lessons sees the kids ditch their uniforms for civvies.

‘Every robe was a slightly less bright red; it was a more muted red,’ nods Heyman. ‘The ties were less vivid, a little more purply red. Alfonso wanted Dumbledore’s robes to be more fluid, not as stiff and formal as [those worn by] Richard Harris. A little less statesman-like. A little more eccentric.’

Harris, sadly, had passed away when *Chamber of Secrets* was in post-production, with the role of Professor Albus Dumbledore inherited by Michael Gambon. Cuarón envisaged the headmaster as more of an ‘old hippie’, as Temime put it, his robes of

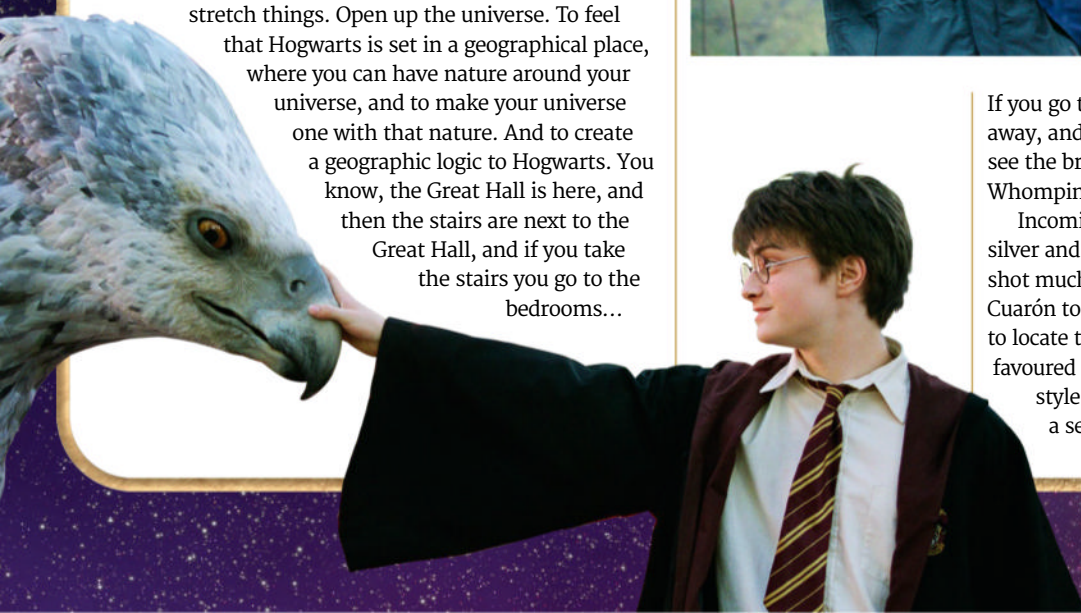


The Prisoner of Azkaban saw Hermione, Harry and Ron explore their places in the world

➤ tie-dyed silk flowing behind him. Professor Lupin, meanwhile, wore unkempt tweeds, with Cuarón desiring that Thewlis exhibit the air of ‘an uncle who parties hard on the weekends’. That Cuarón should introduce Thewlis and Oldman to the established adult cast that included Maggie Smith (Professor McGonagall), Alan Rickman (Severus Snape) and Robbie Coltrane (Hagrid) was no coincidence, again evidencing his desire to freshen the franchise. ‘It was a different culture of acting,’ says Heyman. ‘Not people who are sirs and lords and ladies.’

Also key was Cuarón’s decision to introduce location work to what had largely been a studio-bound franchise. Certainly, much of the 2003 shoot, which ran from 24 February to late November, was conducted at Leavesden Studios in Hertfordshire, but the joyously crazed Knight Bus sequence was shot in Palmers Green and other areas of London, while Scottish locations provided the film’s natural scenery. As for the exhilarating scene in which Harry rides hippogriff Buckbeak, a visit to Virginia Water Lake in Surrey will have you scanning the sky for a swooping winged beast.

But perhaps the most important change wrought by Cuarón was to introduce a more cinematic style, as he determined to explore Hogwarts’ grounds. ‘I can’t do anything unless I have the freedom to do what I do,’ says the director whose earlier films had established his fondness for fluid camera movement. ‘I wanted to stretch things. Open up the universe. To feel that Hogwarts is set in a geographical place, where you can have nature around your universe, and to make your universe one with that nature. And to create a geographic logic to Hogwarts. You know, the Great Hall is here, and then the stairs are next to the Great Hall, and if you take the stairs you go to the bedrooms...



‘I WANTED TO STRETCH THINGS. OPEN UP THE UNIVERSE’

ALFONSO CUARÓN

Cuarón on location with Robbie Coltrane (Hagrid)



If you go to the Clock Tower, the hospital is a corridor away, and you can see the courtyard, and from there you see the bridge... and below that is Hagrid’s hut, and the Whomping Willow on the other side, then the forest...

Incoming DoP Michael Seresin introduced a patina of silver and shadow to reflect the darkening emotions, and shot much of the action with wide-angled lenses to enable Cuarón to incorporate the characters’ body language, and to locate them in relation to Hogwarts. Columbus had favoured close-ups, but Cuarón insists the evolution of style was for a concrete reason: ‘A child doesn’t have a sense of orientation. Places are places.’

The third film pushed the boundaries on creepy sequences



SCARE FARE

Of course, one element that Cuarón was delighted to maintain was John Williams, and the legendary composer distinguished his final franchise collaboration (though his theme would repeat throughout the series) by complementing his existing score with the thrilling and chilling addition of the Frog Choir singing *Double Trouble*. With the lyrics taken from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* ('Something wicked this way comes!'), it adds another tinge of horror to go with the Dementors, the reveal that Lupin is a werewolf, the threat of the murderous Black, and the folk-horror vibe as a sense of ancient power emanates from Hogwarts' slopes and forests.

Some sequences are genuinely scary, and most frightening of all is when the Dementors descend upon the *Hogwarts Express* from a grey, rain-lashed sky [see boxout, below]. Did Heyman and Cuarón ever fear that *Azkaban* was too dark?

'You know, young people don't like to be patronised,' Heyman says. 'It's more parents worrying about their children than children worrying about themselves. So this is edgy. It's thrilling. And the kids, and adults, watching it are enthralled.'

'When I was at the set of the train, it reminded me so much of the Hitchcock films I had seen of the 30s and 40s,' says Cuarón, who worked with master puppeteer Basil Twist to map the movement of puppets performing underwater, in slow motion. The practical effects, though ultimately scrapped, provided creative direction for VFX house Industrial Light & Magic to invest the Dementors with the 'metaphysical quality' that Cuarón desired. But back to Hitch... 'I wanted to do something in that atmosphere. Like Hitchcock, it was more about the anticipation.'

All of these techniques and sequences were sewn together with as much skill as Cuarón brought to bear on stitching together the film's time-travel sequence, in which Hermione uses the Time-Turner to save Buckbeak from execution, and more. For that shot, about a minute's worth of action was filmed on Steadicam against bluescreen, and four minutes of background footage, shot separately, was then speeded up and composited behind the main action, while two other plates of background footage were tiled together as the camera turned. It was multiverse madness long before the MCU, and the result was dazzling.

The same with the movie, which opened in the UK on 31 May 2004 and scored the highest opening weekend at the box office in UK history – a record it kept until *Spectre*'s release in 2015. In the US and Canada, it enjoyed the third biggest opening weekend of all time, racking up a cool \$93.7m. With a worldwide total of \$795.6m, *Prisoner of Azkaban* was the second biggest movie of 2004, behind *Shrek 2*.

The reviews, too, were largely stellar, with *The Hollywood Reporter* calling it 'deeper, darker, visually arresting, and more emotionally satisfying' than the previous Potters, while *Rolling Stone* labelled it a 'dazzler'. Now, 20 years on, it's regarded by critics as the finest Potter movie, though Cuarón is far too modest to accept such praise.

'Critics should ask children and Average Joes!' he laughs. 'I'm grateful, but I have to say, if you ask fans and children, they have different views. But I was lucky that *Azkaban* is the most complex story. I saw it almost as a noir.'

Heyman, naturally, won't choose between his babies. 'They're all my children and they each mark different points in my life,' he says. 'I met my wife on the end of the second film, I brought my stepchildren onto the third film – Alfonso is my son's godfather. The friendships that I made are so significant. I do think three is a very special film, but I also think one, two, four, five, six, seven and eight are, too.'

Cuarón concludes with a contented sigh. 'I was very generously asked if I wanted to stay in the series but I felt that *Prisoner of Azkaban* was such an incredible sense of discovery. I'd been learning every day and I didn't want to stop learning. It's such an incredible universe and I had such a beautiful time.'

HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN IS OUT NOW ON 4K, BLU-RAY, DVD AND DIGITAL.

EYE OPENER

DIRECTOR ALFONSO CUARÓN AND PRODUCER DAVID HEYMAN ON HOW THE SCARY DEMENTORS-BOARD-THE-HOGWARTS-EXPRESS SEQUENCE ALMOST DERAILED...

ALFONSO CUARÓN

'The principles for visual effects were in many ways the same as I was using with mechanical means. I was ignorant [about VFX] but you work with people who know about that technology, and because you're ignorant you can challenge the technology. And the principles are the same. It is about light, and light integration.'

'I did some storyboards for the Dementors on the train, then I would explain to my storyboard artist, Temple Clark. I was like, "And then the water" – because it was raining – "starts turning into ice." He was like, "OK, OK, I get it!" A week later, I was

walking around and everyone was going, "Man, those boards. I don't know how you're going to do it but it's incredible. Visionary." I hadn't seen the storyboards. So I went and looked. When I said turning into "ice", meaning frozen water, the storyboards had "eyes", like how you see. The storyboards were teeming with eyeballs falling down from the sky. The problem was everyone had told me I was a genius. So I had to say things like, "Well, maybe it's too dark..."'

DAVID HEYMAN

'All these eyes started falling from the sky. We were thinking, "What is he trying to say?!"' **JG**



ALAMY



THE BIG
SHOT

E.T.'S FLYING BICYCLE

In 2012, to celebrate its centenary, Universal Pictures ran a public poll to settle upon the most beloved scene from its glorious history. In second place was a shocked Chief Brody (Roy Scheider) telling shark-hunter Quint (Robert Shaw), 'You're gonna need a bigger boat.' But even *Jaws* couldn't match the sight of 10-year-old Elliott (Henry Thomas) cycling his floating BMX past a luminous full moon with E.T. in its basket.

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial might have been Steven Spielberg's idea of fashioning a small-scale, personal movie – it riffed on the imaginary friend he conjured up as a youngster – but it's pure cinema born of shimmering imagination and glimmering spectacle. Set in the Californian suburbs, it tells of an alien lost on Earth, and the heart-warming friendship it develops with the equally lost Elliott.

The film's most magical scene, which became the iconic logo of Spielberg's production company, Amblin Entertainment, has Elliott cycling through a misty forest with E.T., wrapped in a blanket, in his bike's basket. Suddenly the bike is not under Elliott's control. It barrels off the edge of a gully but no sooner has it begun to drop than it soars into the night sky to the ecstatic strains of John Williams' dreamlike score. Trees pass far below. And then, the money shot: Elliott and E.T. drifting past the bloated moon, made more memorable still by the fact that Elliott is still pedalling.

'That was me on a bike on a crane arm on a soundstage with a blue screen behind me,' Thomas later said. 'I was going, "Woo-hoo! Wow! Amazing!" Of course, in the theatres you see it with the rear projection, and it's this beautiful redwood forest floating beneath you.'

In an age when audiences knew less about special effects, it was pure movie magic. Film critic Roger Ebert wrote, 'I remember when I saw the movie at Cannes: even the audience there, people who had seen thousands of movies, let out a whoop at that moment.' And so it was that Spielberg's intimate movie, rejected by Columbia Pictures for not being commercial enough, garnered nine Oscar nominations (winning four), launched a million Halloween costumes and overtook *Star Wars* to become the biggest box-office hit of all time – a record it held for 11 years until Spielberg himself surpassed it with *Jurassic Park*.

How's that for flying high? **JAMIE GRAHAM**



COVERED





IN GLORY



TO MARK OUR MILESTONE 350TH ISSUE
EARLIER THIS YEAR, THE **TOTAL FILM** TEAM
PICKS THE 10 BEST FILMS TO HAVE GRACED
THE COVER OVER THE LAST 27 YEARS –
AND FIVE WE SHOULD HAVE LEFT OFF...

WORDS NEIL SMITH

We don't turn 350 every year, and reaching that not insignificant milestone has got us looking back over our previous issues to select the best (and worst!) films we have featured on our cover. Before making our choices, though, we decided to set a few ground rules. No director would be allowed to have more than one film in our countdowns (not even you, Sir Christopher!); we turfed out year/decade-in-review editions; and we omitted films that didn't debut within our 27-year life span. Got that? Fab. All we need now are 350 candles and a whopping big cake...

ALAMY

JACKIE BROWN

ISSUE 15, APRIL 1998



Total Film was only 15 issues old when Quentin Tarantino's classy and mature adap of Elmore Leonard's *Rum Punch* took over our cover, with blaxploitation icon Pam Grier striking a distinctly Bond-ish pose as its resourceful flight-attendant heroine. And while our team had just as much love for Tarantino's next opus, *Kill Bill* (issue 82, November 2003), in

the end our 'one film per director' rule meant we absolutely, positively could accept no substitutes. All these years later, it still tickles us how Michael Keaton's Ray Nicolette was able to flit between this film and Steven Soderbergh's contemporaneous Leonard yarn *Out of Sight*.

WHAT THEY SAID *'I want all my movies to be special, all the way down my filmography. There are people not even born yet who are going to dig my movies.'* (Quentin Tarantino)



Top Grier

Preparing for an epic case of sunburn



GLADIATOR

ISSUE 41, JUNE 2000



Are you not entertained? We certainly were by Ridley Scott's Roman epic, a brutal and bloody loin-girdler that triumphantly resurrected the sword-and-sandal genre to Oscar-winning effect. One of those accolades rightly went to cover star Russell Crowe for his mesmerising turn as Maximus, a soldier turned showman who will have his vengeance in this life or the next against the emperor who murdered his family (Joaquin Phoenix). And while we are stoked to find out how Scott and Paul Mescal will continue the story in *Gladiator 2*, it's probably asking too much for it to best an original so beloved.

WHAT THEY SAID *'I hired a gangbuster of a cast and put my faith in them. Despite all the problems, I think they did a pretty good job.'* (Ridley Scott)

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS

ISSUE 72, JANUARY 2003



The Return of the King (issue 84, January 2004) may have swept the board at 2004's Oscars, winning Best Picture and 10 more prizes besides. For our money, though, it's the second instalment in Peter Jackson's original Tolkien triptych that remains his most towering achievement. Not only did this film give us the Battle of Helm's Deep - surely the most heart-stopping, awe-inspiring armoured face-off in all of fantasy cinema - but also Andy Serkis' Gollum in all his psychotic, emaciated glory. The scene in which the corrupted hobbit's two personas bicker, cajole and bargain is mo-cap acting at its finest and most ingenious.

WHAT THEY SAID *'This has a lot more action than the first one. There are new creatures and places, over 600 CGI shots and huge battle scenes. Audiences should get swept up by it.'* (Peter Jackson)



Just when we'd come to terms with the death of Gandalf the Grey

Proof that age-gap relationships really can work





SPIDER-MAN 2

ISSUE 91, SUMMER 2004

There have been 10 stand-alone Spider-Man movies in our lifetime, and that's not counting the three films in which he's appeared as part of the MCU. Of all the Spideys we've put on our cover, however, it is the second part of Sam Raimi's Tobey Maguire trilogy that sits masked head and shoulders above them. Have adventure, drama and romance ever been so seamlessly united in one superhero movie? And has any supervillain since been quite so cool as Alfred Molina's Doc Ock? Well, maybe one (see overleaf). Yet the real marvel is undoubtedly how fresh it still feels, even 20 years on.

WHAT THEY SAID *'I wasn't setting out to make this one better than the last. My job was to find out what was interesting about the first picture and develop it.'* (Sam Raimi)

'Peter, now is not the time for another upside-down kiss!'



Remember when people thought he couldn't play Bond because of his hair colour?



CASINO ROYALE

ISSUE 122, DECEMBER 2006

Pierce Brosnan was Bond when *TF* was born, and he made several appearances on our covers. When Daniel Craig was cast as his successor, though, it was clear from the off we were in for something different. Martin Campbell's film - his second Bond after 1995's *GoldenEye* - delivered on that promise with a tough, gritty do-over that took its cue from its leading man's game-changing portrayal. Craig's days in the tuxedo weren't always golden, yet his willingness to be as vulnerable as he was ruthless, and as human as he was heroic, ensured his dynamic double-O debut was damn near definitive.

WHAT THEY SAID *'We're not doing Hamlet, but having an actor of Dan's ability makes a huge difference. The book formulates the character of Bond, and Dan encapsulates what Fleming was talking about.'* (Martin Campbell)



WALL·E

ISSUE 142, SUMMER 2008

Pixar was just getting started when *TF*'s presses began rolling, and it took a while for us to land on the perfect cover-worthy film from the game-changing animation studio. By the time Andrew Stanton introduced us to his lovelorn robot trash-picker, however, every new Pixar release had become an event, meaning it was a relative no-brainer for us to make its metal lead our only animated cover star. Watching *WALL·E* wordlessly fall for the sleek and hi-tech EVE touched our team's hearts in ways we never thought were possible. The result was an animated *2001* every bit as warm as Kubrick's was arctic.

WHAT THEY SAID *'I wrote the first act of the movie in a couple of months. It's a simple love story of a guy robot and a girl robot.'* (Andrew Stanton)



Tell us you wouldn't do anything for those big round eyes



THE DARK KNIGHT

ISSUE 143, JULY 2008



We were on something of a roll in 2008, the issue with *WALL•E* on the cover having a blockbuster sequel of its own in an edition dominated by Christopher Nolan's landmark Batman follow-up. In truth, its predecessor could have also made it onto this list. However, we opted to give *The Dark Knight* the edge over *Batman Begins* for its superior action, dystopian daring and a rogue element that no one saw coming: Heath Ledger's Joker, a bonkers force of twisted nature that instantly became the jewel in the crown of its late creator's posthumous big-screen legacy.

WHAT THEY SAID *'The sequels I've really liked have been films like The Empire Strikes Back or The Godfather Part II. We were looking to try to emulate them in terms of our ambition.'* (Christopher Nolan)



Heath Ledger, 1979-2008. Such an incredible loss

Some days just don't go to plan



MAD MAX: FURY ROAD

ISSUE 231, MAY 2015

We weren't around when George Miller released his original Mad Max trilogy, but we were here for *Fury Road*, as audacious and jaw-dropping a reboot as any we've had the pleasure of witnessing. Tom Hardy's re-energised Rockatansky occupied the foreground in our cover two-shot, with Charlize Theron's Furiosa located subtly behind him. In the film itself, though, it was Theron who took the reins, her buzzcut-sporting, metal-armed badass establishing herself immediately as an action heroine for the ages. 'I don't think anyone's ever seen anything quite like Furiosa before,' Miller told us in 2015. To find out how Anya Taylor-Joy compares, flip to page 30.

WHAT THEY SAID *'Every sequence had some element of risk or stunt. That was the thing that created the most anxiety in me: how are we going to avoid killing someone today?'* (George Miller)



DUNE

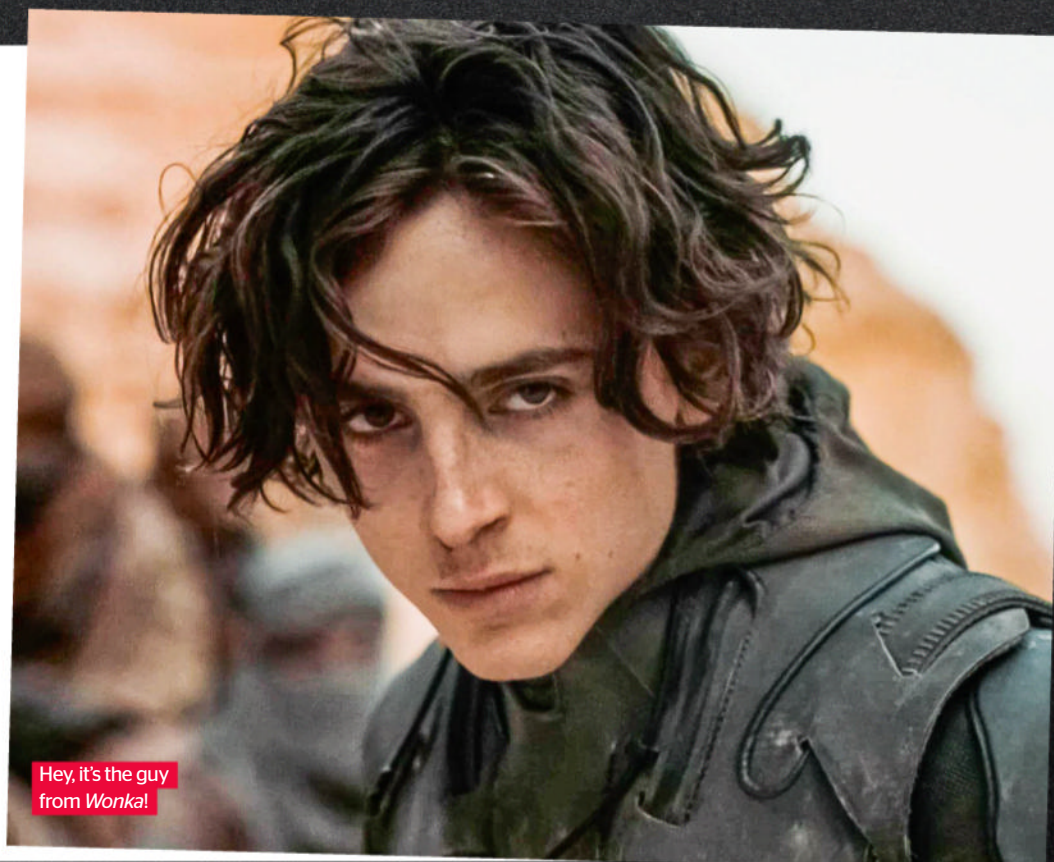
ISSUE 315, SEPTEMBER 2021



With *Blade Runner 2049* and *Dune: Part Two* just as worthy of inclusion, it was a hard job deciding which Denis Villeneuve film ought to feature in this rundown. When push comes to shove, however, it's impossible to look past the first of his Dunes, a masterful exercise

in comprehensive world-building that did Frank Herbert's novel proud in ways David Lynch never could. Admittedly, much of it is scene-setting: a prelude to a second act that was bigger, bolder and grander in its conception and execution. When viewed as a visionary filmmaker's artistic statement, though, *Part One* was ultimately purer.

WHAT THEY SAID *'At the end of the day a movie exists once it's shared with audience members. It is a relief to know that people are feeling we honoured the source material.'* (Denis Villeneuve)



Hey, it's the guy from *Wonka*!

TOP GUN: MAVERICK

ISSUE 323, APRIL 2022



Six Mission: Impossible were released between the original Tony Scott *Top Gun* and its long-in-gestation sequel. It was probably not surprising, then, that there was a touch of the IMF to its story of an older but not necessarily wiser Maverick tutoring the next gen of naval aviators, one of whom (Miles Teller) just happens to be the son of his late pal, Goose. Sky-scorching action was a given in Joseph Kosinski's jet-propelled people-pleaser, yet what really slayed us was the emotional heights it took us to. Case in point? A Tom Cruise-Val Kilmer reunion that had us weeping buckets.

WHAT THEY SAID *'The first film was a rite-of-passage story, and I knew this had to be the same. There had to be an emotional journey for Maverick to go through.'* (Joseph Kosinski)



Flying back into the Danger Zone

Tom Cruise: our wingman, anytime

??? WHAT WERE WE THINKING? FIVE COVER CHOICES THAT CAME BACK TO HAUNT US... ???



LARA CROFT: TOMB RAIDER
- THE CRADLE OF LIFE
ISSUE 80, SEPTEMBER 2003

'Sharper', 'edgier' and 'sexier' were among the words we used to trumpet Angelina's second Lara saga. 'Lousier' would have sufficed.



CATWOMAN
ISSUE 87, APRIL 2004

A mere 10 months after we put this 8%-on-Rotten Tomatoes movie on our cover, star Halle Berry called the superhero stinker 'a piece of shit'. Meow!



VAN HELSING
ISSUE 88, MAY 2004

And then what did we do? Why, only put Hugh Jackman's Dracula dreck-tacular on the cover of our very next issue. Spring 2004 was obviously a difficult time for us...



THE SPIRIT
ISSUE 144, AUGUST 2008;
ISSUE 149, CHRISTMAS 2008

We all make mistakes, don't we? And devoting two - two! - covers to Frank Miller's comic-book calamity is definitely one of our biggest.



TERMINATOR GENISYS
ISSUE 233, JULY 2015

We went all the way to Los Angeles to report on Arnie's cyborg comeback. We should have stayed at home. Does anyone still have their free interactive poster?

2024 MOVIE CHECKLIST

HOW MANY HAVE YOU SEEN?

JANUARY

- ☐ All of Us Strangers
- ☐ Baghead
- ☐ The Beekeeper
- ☐ The Boys in the Boat
- ☐ The Color Purple
- ☐ The End We Start From
- ☐ Foe
- ☐ Good Grief
- ☐ The Holdovers
- ☐ Jackdaw
- ☐ The Kitchen
- ☐ Lift
- ☐ Mean Girls (2024)
- ☐ Night Swim
- ☐ One Life
- ☐ Orion and the Dark
- ☐ Poor Things
- ☐ Priscilla
- ☐ Role Play
- ☐ Scala!!!!
- ☐ Society of the Snow
- ☐ The Underdogs

FEB

- ☐ American Fiction
- ☐ American Star
- ☐ Argyle
- ☐ Bob Marley: One Love
- ☐ Gassed Up
- ☐ The Iron Claw
- ☐ Madame Web
- ☐ Memory
- ☐ Migration
- ☐ Miller's Girl
- ☐ Occupied City
- ☐ Perfect Days
- ☐ The Promised Land
- ☐ Shoshana
- ☐ Spaceman
- ☐ The Taste of Things
- ☐ This is Me... Now: A Love Story
- ☐ Upgraded
- ☐ Wicked Little Letters
- ☐ The Zone of Interest

MARCH

- ☐ The Beautiful Game
- ☐ Damsel
- ☐ Disco Boy
- ☐ Drift
- ☐ Drive-Away Dolls
- ☐ Dune: Part Two
- ☐ Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire
- ☐ Godzilla X Kong: The New Empire
- ☐ High & Low: John Galliano
- ☐ Imaginary
- ☐ Immaculate
- ☐ Kung Fu Panda 4
- ☐ Late Night with the Devil
- ☐ Lisa Frankenstein
- ☐ Monster
- ☐ Mothers' Instinct
- ☐ The New Boy
- ☐ Origin
- ☐ The Persian Version
- ☐ Red Island
- ☐ Ricky Stanicky
- ☐ Road House
- ☐ Robot Dreams
- ☐ Silver Haze
- ☐ Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour

APRIL

- ☐ Abigail
- ☐ The American Society of Magical Negroes
- ☐ Back to Black
- ☐ Bleeding Love
- ☐ The Book of Clarence
- ☐ Boy Kills World
- ☐ Challengers
- ☐ Civil War
- ☐ Evil Does Not Exist
- ☐ The First Omen
- ☐ I.S.S.
- ☐ Io Capitano
- ☐ Jeanne Du Barry
- ☐ Kidnapped
- ☐ Monkey Man
- ☐ Ordinary Angels
- ☐ Rebel Moon - Part Two: The Scargiver
- ☐ Scoop
- ☐ Seize Them!
- ☐ Sometimes I Think About Dying
- ☐ Spy X Family Code: White
- ☐ Swede Caroline
- ☐ The Teachers' Lounge
- ☐ The Trouble with Jessica

MAY

- ☐ The Almond and the Seahorse
- ☐ Atlas
- ☐ The Beast
- ☐ Blackbird Blackbird Blackberry
- ☐ The Fall Guy
- ☐ Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga
- ☐ The Garfield Movie
- ☐ Hoard
- ☐ The Idea of You
- ☐ IF
- ☐ In Flames
- ☐ Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes
- ☐ La Chimera
- ☐ Love Lies Bleeding
- ☐ Made In England: The Films Of Powell & Pressburger
- ☐ Mother of the Bride
- ☐ Slow
- ☐ Sting
- ☐ The Strangers: Chapter 1
- ☐ Tarot
- ☐ Tiger Stripes
- ☐ Twilight of the Warriors: Walled In
- ☐ Unfrosted
- ☐ Young Woman and the Sea

JUNE

- ☐ A Family Affair
- ☐ A Quiet Place: Day One
- ☐ Arcadian
- ☐ Bad Boys: Ride or Die
- ☐ The Bikeriders
- ☐ The Dead Don't Hurt
- ☐ Eternal You
- ☐ The Exorcism
- ☐ Fancy Dance
- ☐ Freud's Last Session
- ☐ Green Border
- ☐ Horizon: An American Saga Chapter One
- ☐ Hounds
- ☐ I Am: Celine Dion
- ☐ Inside Out 2

Kinds of Kindness

- ☐ Rosalie
- ☐ Rose
- ☐ Sasquatch Sunset
- ☐ Something in the Water
- ☐ Treasure
- ☐ Trigger Warning
- ☐ Ultraman: Rising
- ☐ Under Paris
- ☐ The Watched
- ☐ Winnie the Pooh: Blood and Honey 2
- ☐ Ama Gloria

JULY

- ☐ About Dry Grasses
- ☐ Beverly Hills Cop: Axel F
- ☐ blur: to the End
- ☐ Coma
- ☐ The Commandants Shadow
- ☐ Crossing
- ☐ Deadpool & Wolverine
- ☐ Despicable Me 4
- ☐ Fly Me to the Moon
- ☐ Harold and the Purple Crayon
- ☐ Hundreds of Beavers
- ☐ I Saw the TV Glow
- ☐ In a Violent Nature
- ☐ Janet Planet
- ☐ Kill
- ☐ Longlegs
- ☐ MaXXXine
- ☐ My Spy: The Eternal City
- ☐ Orlando, My Political Biography
- ☐ Shayda
- ☐ Sleep
- ☐ Space Cadet
- ☐ Thelma
- ☐ Twisters
- ☐ Unicorns

AUGUST

- ☐ Afraid
- ☐ Alien: Romulus
- ☐ Babes
- ☐ Between the Temples
- ☐ Black Dog
- ☐ Blink Twice
- ☐ Borderlands
- ☐ Caligula: The Ultimate Cut
- ☐ Close to You
- ☐ The Crow
- ☐ Cuckoo
- ☐ Didi
- ☐ Duchess
- ☐ Hollywoodgate
- ☐ The Instigators
- ☐ It Ends With Us
- ☐ Jackpot!
- ☐ Kneecap
- ☐ Mandoob (Night Courier)
- ☐ The Mountain Within Me
- ☐ Only the River Flows
- ☐ Ozi: Voice of the Forest
- ☐ Radical
- ☐ Sing Sing
- ☐ Sky Peals
- ☐ Touch
- ☐ Tuesday
- ☐ The Union
- ☐ Widow Clicquot

SEPTEMBER

- ☐ Beetlejuice Beetlejuice
- ☐ The Critic
- ☐ Firebrand
- ☐ The Goldman Case
- ☐ Hellboy: The Crooked Man
- ☐ His Three Daughters
- ☐ In Camera
- ☐ Lee
- ☐ Megalopolis
- ☐ My Favourite Cake
- ☐ My Old Ass
- ☐ Napoleon: The Director's Cut
- ☐ Never Let Go
- ☐ The Outrun
- ☐ Rebel Ridge
- ☐ Red Rooms
- ☐ Speak No Evil
- ☐ Starve Acre
- ☐ Strange Darling
- ☐ The Substance
- ☐ Uglies
- ☐ Wolfs

OCTOBER

- ☐ A Different Man
- ☐ The Apprentice
- ☐ Brothers
- ☐ The Crime is Mine
- ☐ Dahomey
- ☐ Flight Risk
- ☐ The Front Room
- ☐ Joker: Folie à Deux
- ☐ The Platform 2
- ☐ Layla
- ☐ Salem's Lot
- ☐ Smile 2
- ☐ Terrifier 3
- ☐ Timestalker
- ☐ Transformers One
- ☐ Venom: The Last Dance
- ☐ The Wild Robot

NOVEMBER

- ☐ Anora
- ☐ Bird
- ☐ Conclave
- ☐ Gladiator II
- ☐ Heretic
- ☐ Joy
- ☐ Moana 2
- ☐ Never Look Away
- ☐ Paddington in Peru
- ☐ Piece by Piece
- ☐ Red One
- ☐ Small Things Like These
- ☐ Spellbound
- ☐ Super/Man: The Story of Christopher Reeve
- ☐ That Christmas
- ☐ Wicked
- ☐ Your Monster

DECEMBER

- ☐ Babygirl
- ☐ Kraven the Hunter
- ☐ Lord Of The Rings: The War Of The Rohirrim
- ☐ Mufasa: The Lion King
- ☐ Sonic the Hedgehog 3
- ☐ Wallace & Gromit: Vengeance Most Fowl

TOTAL FILM ANNUAL 2025



DEEP-DIVE FEATURES

Uncover the making-of secrets behind the year's biggest movies, told by the people who them. Dune: Part Two! Challengers! Deadpool & Wolverine! Alien: Romulus! And more!



IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Film icons face TF's probing questions! Read career-spanning conversations with Ridley Scott, Natalie Portman, Thelma Schoonmaker, Anthony Mackie, Jack Black and more.



CINEMATIC CLASSICS

Assessing the impact of the milestone movies of yesterday, including The Blair Witch Project, Gremlins, After Hours and the films of William Friedkin.